

Nevaeh: 93

Aurora

Marcel Ray Duriez

Chapter One: Arrival in Rockville

By Marcel Ray Duriez

The sky above Rockville was an iron sheet - overcast, unmoved - as though time had grown weary here. Rain curled against the windows of the bus, and in the blurred world outside, tall pines stood like silent watchers.

I hadn't wanted to come.

But I had said yes - to silence the grief in my mother's eyes, to give her the freedom to chase love once more. She belonged beneath the amber skies of Arizona with that freckled man who smiled like he knew how to love someone fragile. I didn't. I never had.

So now I was here. Rockville.

The name alone sounded like it belonged to ghosts.

I stepped off the bus with a single bag and a heart too heavy for sixteen. The air bit at my skin, wet and cold, smelling of bark and old stones. The town clung to the earth like it didn't want to be seen - hidden between forests and the low breath of fog.

My step-father, Johnathan, waited in a pickup that looked like it had weathered more winters than either of us. He didn't speak much - never had - but his nod was something close to kindness. I climbed into the truck and left whatever life I had behind, watching the road twist and vanish in the mirrors.

Rockville was dim. The houses sat like secrets. Moss crawled up fences. Every tree whispered things I couldn't quite hear.

I'd be staying in my father's weathered house near the edge of the town. It smelled like cedar and coffee grounds and a kind of quiet I didn't know how to live in.

I unpacked slowly, brushing dust from an old dresser drawer. I set my books beside the window, opened my journal, and stared at the blank page.

*"Day One. I am here, but I do
not belong. I am a shadow
pretending to be real. The trees
are watching."*

At school the next morning, I felt their eyes. Students parted like waves around me - not with cruelty, but curiosity. The girl who didn't smile. The girl with desert in her bones. I gave them nothing. I didn't know how.

Until I saw *him*.

He sat alone at the far end of the cafeteria. Not alone like someone cast out - alone like someone who didn't care to be included. He was porcelain-pale, like he had been carved from some place before the world was finished. His eyes caught mine - only for a second - and I felt it, sudden and sharp.

Recognition? No. Something older than that. Like a memory I'd never made.

Later, in Biology, he sat beside me. His name, the teacher said, was Lucian Evermoore.

Lucian. A name that tasted like ash and snowfall.

He didn't speak.

He only looked at me like he knew something I didn't. Like he'd already read the pages I hadn't written yet.

And in that instant, I felt it - the strange certainty that something in my life had quietly begun unraveling.

Or becoming.

Chapter Two: The Unbroken Thread

The next day was better... and worse.

It was better because it wasn't raining yet, though the clouds hung heavy and thick. It was easier because I knew what to expect from the day. Lucas came to sit beside me in English, and walked me to my next class, with Dylan shooting him sharp glares the whole way - that was nattering. People didn't stare quite as much as they had yesterday. I sat with a big group at lunch - Lucas, Dylan, Mia, and several others whose names and faces I was finally starting to remember. For once, I felt like I was treading water, not drowning.

It was worse because I was exhausted; sleep still eluded me with the wind howling through the house. It was worse when Mr. Varner called on me in Trig, hand down, and I

gave the wrong answer. Miserable because I had to play volleyball, and the one time I didn't flinch, I hit my teammate square in the head. And worse still because Nathan Hale wasn't in school at all.

All morning I dreaded lunch, bracing for his strange glares. Part of me wanted to confront him, demand to know what his problem was. While lying sleepless in bed, I even rehearsed what I'd say. But I knew myself too well - I made the Cowardly Lion look like the Terminator.

When I stepped into the cafeteria with Mia - trying and failing to keep my eyes from scanning the room for him - I saw his four siblings sitting together, and Nathan was nowhere among them.

Lucas intercepted us, steering us to his table. Mia seemed thrilled by the attention, and her friends quickly joined us. But as I tried to follow their easy chatter, I felt awkward, waiting nervously for the moment Nathan might show. I hoped he'd ignore me, prove my suspicions wrong.

He didn't come, and the longer I waited, the tighter my chest grew.

By the end of lunch, with Nathan still a no-show, I walked to Biology with more confidence. Lucas, who was turning into a golden retriever, stuck faithfully by my side to class. I held my breath at the door, but Nathan wasn't there either. I exhaled and went to my seat. Lucas followed, talking about a beach trip he was planning. He lingered by my desk

until the bell rang, then gave me a wistful smile before sitting with a girl sporting braces and a terrible perm. Looks like I'd have to figure out Lucas, and it wouldn't be easy. In a small town like this, where everyone lived on top of each other, diplomacy was key. I'd never been tactful; I had zero experience dealing with overly friendly boys.

Relieved to have the desk to myself, to find Nathan absent, I told myself that over and over. But a nagging suspicion gnawed at me - maybe I was why he wasn't there. Ridiculous and egotistical to think I could affect anyone that much. Impossible. And yet I couldn't stop worrying it might be true.

When school finally ended, and the blush faded from my cheeks after the volleyball

fiasco, I changed quickly into jeans and a navy blue sweater. I hurried from the girls' locker room, glad I'd dodged my retriever friend for the moment. The parking lot was crowded now with students rushing to leave. I climbed into my truck and rummaged through my bag to check I had what I needed.

Last night, I'd learned Mark couldn't cook much besides fried eggs and bacon, so I'd volunteered for kitchen duty while I was here. He handed over the banquet hall keys without complaint. I also found out there was no food in the house. So, armed with my shopping list and cash from the jar labeled FOOD, MONEY, I headed to the Thriftway.

I fired up the truck's deafening engine, ignoring the heads turning toward me, and

backed carefully into a spot in the line of cars waiting to exit. Trying to pretend the roaring noise wasn't mine, I watched Nathan and his siblings, along with the Hale twins, pile into their shiny new Volvo. Of course. I hadn't noticed their clothes before - too mesmerized by their faces. Now, looking closer, they were dressed simply but exquisitely, the subtle hints of designer labels clear. With their stunning looks and effortless style, they could probably wear rags and still pull it off. It felt excessive - to have both beauty and money. But life often worked that way. Though it didn't seem to have earned them any acceptance here.

No, I didn't fully buy that. Maybe their isolation was by choice. I couldn't imagine any door that degree of beauty wouldn't open.

They glanced at my noisy truck as I passed
- like everyone else did. I stared straight
ahead, relieved when I finally cleared the
school grounds.

The Thriftway wasn't far, just a few streets
south, off the highway. It felt good to be inside
a normal place. I slipped into the familiar
rhythm of shopping easily. The store was big
enough I couldn't hear the rain tapping on the
roof, keeping the world outside at bay.

Back home, I unloaded the groceries,
stuffing them wherever I could find space. I
hoped Mark wouldn't mind. I wrapped
potatoes in foil and tucked them into the oven
to bake, marinated a steak and balanced it
atop a carton of eggs in the fridge.

Once finished, I took my backpack upstairs. Before diving into homework, I changed into dry sweats, pulled my damp hair into a ponytail, and checked my e-mail for the first time. Three messages waited.

“Ava,” my mom wrote...

Write me as soon as you get in. Tell me how your flight was. Is it raining? I miss you already. I’m almost finished packing for Florida, but I can’t find my pink blouse. Do you know where I put it? Jason says hi. Mom.

I sighed and moved to the next message, sent eight hours after the first.

“Ava,” she wrote...

Why haven't you e-mailed me yet? What are you waiting for? Mom.

The last was from this morning.

IsaNaddalin,

If I haven't heard from you by 5:30 p.m. today I'm calling Mark.

I checked the clock. Still had an hour, but Mom was known for jumping the gun.

Mom,

Calm down. I'm writing right now. Don't do anything rash. Ava.

I sent it, then began again.

Mom,

Everything is great. Of course it's raining.
I was waiting for something to write about.
School isn't bad, just a little repetitive. I met
some nice kids who sit by me at lunch.

Your blouse is at the dry cleaners - you
were supposed to pick it up Friday.

Mark bought me a truck, can you believe
it? I love it. It's old, but really sturdy, which is
good, you know, for me.

I miss you, too. I'll write again soon, but
I'm not going to check my e-mail every five
minutes. Relax, breathe. I love you. Ava.

I decided to reread *Wuthering Heights* -
the novel we were studying in English - for
fun, and that's what I was doing when Mark
came home. I'd lost track of time and hurried

downstairs to take the potatoes out and put the steak under the broiler.

“Ava?” my dad called from downstairs.

Who else? I thought.

“Hey, Dad. Welcome home.”

Chapter Three: Disclosed

'Thanks.' Marcellus unhooked his gun belt, the worn leather a familiar creak, and kicked off his boots as I flitted around the kitchen. As far as I knew, that weapon had never seen action in his long career, but he kept it ready, always. Back when I was a kid, the first thing he'd do was strip the bullets the moment he walked in. Guess he figured I was old enough now not to accidentally pull the trigger, and,

perhaps more tellingly, not desperate enough to do it on purpose.

'What's for dinner?' he asked, a wariness in his voice that tugged at something in me. My mother, bless her imaginative soul, often produced culinary experiments that were more abstract art than edible fare. It surprised, and saddened, me that he still remembered that particular quirk from so long ago.

'Steak and potatoes,' I replied, and the relief that washed over his face was almost comical.

He seemed uncomfortable, just standing there doing nothing, so he ambled into the living room to let the TV fill the silence while I worked. We were both more at ease that way.

I tossed a quick salad while the steaks sizzled, then set the table with an almost robotic precision.

When dinner was ready, I called him in, and he entered, sniffing the air appreciatively.

'Smells good, Ava.'

'Thanks.'

We ate for a few minutes in a comfortable silence. It wasn't strained or awkward. Neither of us seemed to mind the quiet. In a strange way, we were perfectly suited for sharing this small house.

'So, how was school? Made any friends yet?' he asked, reaching for a second helping.

'Well, I have a few classes with Selene. I sit with her friends at lunch. And there's this boy, Kaelen, who's really friendly. Everyone seems pretty nice, actually.' I held back the one glaring, outstanding exception.

'That must be Kaelen Newton. Good kid - good family. His dad owns the sporting goods store just outside of town. Does pretty well off all the backpackers who come through here.'

'Do you know the Ainsley family?' I asked, a tremor in my voice I hoped he didn't catch.

'Dr. Ainsley's family? Sure. Dr. Ainsley's a great man.'

'They... the kids... they're a little different. They don't really seem to fit in at school.'

Marcellus surprised me by suddenly looking angry.

'People in this town,' he grumbled, his voice low and dangerous. 'Dr. Ainsley is a brilliant surgeon, could probably work in any hospital on the planet, make ten times what he earns here,' he continued, getting louder with each word. 'We're lucky to have him - lucky his wife wanted to settle in a small town. He's an asset to this community, and every single one of those kids is well-behaved and polite. I had my doubts when they first moved in, with all those adopted teenagers. Thought we might have some trouble. But they're all incredibly mature - I haven't had one speck of complaint from any of them. That's more than I can say for some of the children who've lived

here for generations. And they stick together, the way a family should – camping trips almost every weekend... Just because they're newcomers, people feel the need to talk.'

It was the longest speech I'd ever heard Marcellus deliver. Whatever people were saying about the Ainsley family, it clearly hit a nerve with him.

I quickly backpedaled. 'They seemed nice enough to me. I just noticed they kept to themselves. They're all very attractive, too,' I added, hoping the compliment would smooth things over.

'You should see the doctor,' Marcellus chuckled. 'Good thing he's happily married. A

lot of the nurses at the hospital have a hard time focusing on their work with him around.'

We lapsed back into a comfortable silence as we finished our meal. He cleared the table while I began washing the dishes by hand - no dishwasher, of course. He retreated to the television, and after I finished up, I headed upstairs, dragging my feet toward the looming dread of math homework. I could feel a new tradition solidifying. That night, finally, the house settled into quiet. Exhaustion claimed me quickly.

The rest of the week passed without much incident. I fell into the rhythm of my classes. By Friday, I could recognize, if not name, almost everyone at school. In Gym, the kids on my team quickly learned not to pass me the

ball and to strategically step in front of me if the opposing team tried to exploit my utter lack of coordination. I was more than happy to stay out of their way.

Eryndor Ainsley didn't return to school.

Every day, I'd watch anxiously until the rest of the Ainsleys walked into the cafeteria without him. Only then could I truly relax and join the lunchtime chatter. Most of it revolved around a trip to the La Push Ocean Park in two weeks that Kaelen was organizing. I'd been invited, and I'd agreed to go, more out of politeness than any actual desire. Beaches, in my experience, were supposed to be hot and dry.

By Friday, I felt perfectly at ease walking into my Biology class, no longer bracing myself for Eryndor's presence. For all I knew, he'd dropped out. I tried not to think about him, but a nagging worry persisted that I was somehow responsible for his continued absence, no matter how ridiculous that seemed.

My first weekend in Rockville unfolded uneventfully. Marcellus, unaccustomed to spending time in a usually empty house, worked most of it. I cleaned, got ahead on my homework, and drafted another bogusly cheerful email to my mom. I drove to the library on Saturday, but it was so poorly stocked I didn't even bother getting a card. I'd have to make a trip to Olympia or Seattle soon

to find a decent bookstore. Idly, I wondered what kind of gas mileage that truck actually got... then shuddered at the thought.

The rain over the weekend remained soft, a quiet murmur against the windows, allowing me to sleep soundly.

Monday morning, people actually greeted me in the parking lot. I still didn't know all their names, but I waved back and managed a smile for everyone. It was colder today, but thankfully, not raining. In English, Kaelen slid into his usual seat beside me. We had a pop quiz on *Wuthering Heights*. It was straightforward, surprisingly easy.

All in all, I was feeling far more comfortable than I'd anticipated. More

comfortable than I'd ever expected to feel here, in this perpetually damp corner of the world.

As we stepped out of class, the air swirled with tiny bits of white. I could hear excited shouts echoing around me. The wind nipped at my cheeks, my nose.

'Wow,' Kaelen breathed. 'It's snowing.'

I squinted at the little cotton fluffs accumulating along the sidewalk, tumbling erratically past my face.

'Ew.' Snow. There went my good day.

He looked genuinely surprised. 'Don't you like snow?'

'No. That means it's too cold for rain.'

Obviously. 'Besides, I thought it was supposed to come down in flakes – you know, each one unique and all that. These just look like the ends of Q-tips.'

'Haven't you ever seen snow fall before?'

he asked, incredulous.

'Sure, I have.' I paused. 'On TV.'

Kaelen laughed. Then, a large, squishy ball of dripping snow splatted against the back of his head. We both spun around to see where it came from. My suspicions immediately landed on Zephyr, who was walking away, his back to us – in the completely wrong direction for his next class. Kaelen apparently had the same

notion. He bent down, already scraping together a pile of the white mush.

'I'll see you at lunch, okay?' I called out, keeping my pace. 'Once people start throwing wet stuff, I go inside.'

He merely nodded, his eyes fixed on Zephyr's retreating figure.

Throughout the rest of the morning, everyone chattered excitedly about the snow; apparently, it was the first snowfall of the new year. I kept my mouth shut. Sure, it was drier than rain – until it melted into your socks.

I walked warily to the cafeteria with Selene after Spanish. Mush balls were flying everywhere. I held my binder up, ready to use

it as a makeshift shield if necessary. Selene thought I was hilarious, but something in my expression must have deterred her from lobbing a snowball at me herself.

Kaelen caught up to us as we walked through the doors, laughing, with ice melting the carefully spiked gel from his hair. He and Selene were talking animatedly about the snowball fight as we joined the food line. Out of pure habit, my gaze flickered to that table in the corner. And then I froze. There were five people seated there.

Selene tugged on my arm.

'Hello? Ava? What do you want?'

I looked down, my ears burning. I had no reason to feel self-conscious, I reminded myself. I hadn't done anything wrong.

'What's with Ava?' Kaelen asked Selene.

'Nothing,' I answered, my voice a little too sharp. 'I'll just get a soda today.' I quickly moved to the end of the line.

'Aren't you hungry?' Selene asked, bewildered.

'Actually, I feel a little sick,' I said, my eyes still fixed on the scuffed linoleum.

I waited for them to get their food, then trailed behind them to a table, my gaze still glued to my feet.

I sipped my soda slowly, my stomach churning with an unpleasant nervousness. Twice, Kaelen asked, with an almost unnecessary degree of concern, how I was feeling. I mumbled that it was nothing, but I briefly considered feigning a full-blown illness to escape to the nurse's office for the next hour. Ridiculous. I shouldn't have to run away. I decided to permit myself one quick glance at the Ainsley family's table. If he was glaring at me, then, yes, I would skip Biology, like the coward I was.

I kept my head down, lifting my eyes just barely beneath my lashes. None of them were looking our way. I dared to lift my head a little more. They were laughing. Eryndor, Thalen, and Darius all had their hair completely

soaked with melting snow. Lyra and Aria were leaning away, giggling, as Darius dramatically shook his dripping hair towards them. They were enjoying the snowy day, just like everyone else – only they looked less like a bunch of teenagers and more like a scene plucked straight from a high-budget movie.

But aside from the laughter and playful banter, there was something else, something subtly *different*, and I couldn't quite put my finger on it. I focused on Eryndor, examining him most carefully. His skin seemed less pale, I decided – flushed from the snowball fight, maybe – the shadows under his eyes far less pronounced. But there was something more. I pondered, staring, trying to isolate the change.

'Ava, what are you staring at?' Selene's voice intruded, her eyes following my gaze.

At that precise moment, his eyes, impossibly, flashed over to meet mine. I instantly dropped my head, letting my hair fall forward to conceal my face. But I was sure, in that fleeting instant our eyes connected, that he didn't look harsh or unfriendly as he had the last time I'd seen him. He looked merely curious again, an odd, almost unsatisfied expression in their depths.

'Eryndor Ainsley is staring at you,' Selene giggled into my ear.

'He doesn't look angry, does he?' I couldn't help asking, my voice barely a whisper.

'No,' she said, sounding confused by my question. 'Should he be?'

'I don't think he likes me,' I confided, the queasy feeling in my stomach intensifying. I rested my head on my arm.

'The Ainsleys don't really *like* anybody... well, they don't *notice* anybody enough to like them. But he's still staring at you.'

'Stop looking at him,' I hissed, a sudden urgency in my tone.

She snickered, but mercifully, she looked away. I lifted my head just enough to confirm she had, briefly contemplating violence if she resisted.

Kaelen interrupted us then – he was planning an 'epic battle of the blizzard' in the parking lot after school and wanted us to join. Selene agreed with enthusiastic gusto. The way she looked at Kaelen left little doubt that she'd be up for anything he suggested. I remained silent. I'd have to hide in the gym until the parking lot cleared.

For the rest of the lunch hour, I very carefully kept my eyes on my own table. I decided to honor the bargain I'd made with myself. Since he didn't look angry, I would go to Biology. My stomach, however, performed a series of frightened little flips at the thought of sitting next to him again.

I didn't really want to walk to class with Kaelen as usual – he seemed to be a prime

target for the snowball snipers – but when we reached the door, everyone else besides me groaned in unison. It was raining, washing away all traces of the snow in clear, icy ribbons down the walkway. I pulled my hood up, a secret pleasure blossoming inside me. I'd be free to go straight home after Gym.

Kaelen kept up a string of complaints on the way to building four.

Once inside the classroom, I saw with immense relief that my table was still empty. Professor Varek was moving around the room, distributing a microscope and a box of slides to each table. Class wouldn't start for a few minutes, and the room buzzed with conversation. I kept my eyes studiously away

from the door, doodling aimlessly on the cover of my notebook.

I heard very clearly when the chair next to me moved, but my eyes remained fixed on the intricate pattern I was drawing.

'Hello,' a quiet, musical voice said.

I looked up, utterly stunned that he was speaking to *me*. He was seated as far away from me as the desk allowed, yet his chair was angled toward me. His hair was dripping wet, disheveled – even so, he looked like he'd just finished shooting a commercial for hair gel. His dazzling face was friendly, open, a faint, almost imperceptible smile playing on his flawless lips. But his eyes were careful, watchful.

'My name is Eryndor Ainsley,' he continued. 'I didn't have a chance to introduce myself last week. You must be Ava Amsel.'

My mind spun with confusion. Had I made the whole thing up? He was perfectly polite now. I had to speak; he was waiting. But I couldn't think of anything remotely conventional to say.

'H-how do you know my name?' I stammered, feeling like an utter fool.

He chuckled, a soft, enchanting sound.

'Oh, I think everyone knows your name. The whole town's been waiting for you to arrive.'

I grimaced. I knew it was something like that.

'No,' I persisted, stupidly. 'I meant, why did you call me Ava?'

He seemed genuinely confused. 'Do you prefer Nevaeh?'

'No, I like Ava,' I said quickly. 'But I think Marcellus - I mean, my dad - must call me Nevaeh behind my back - that's what everyone here seems to know me as,' I tried to explain, feeling even more like a moron.

'Oh.' He let it drop. I looked away awkwardly, unable to hold his gaze.

Thankfully, Professor Varek called the class to order at that exact moment. I tried to

concentrate as he explained the lab we'd be doing today. The slides in the box were out of order. Working as lab partners, we had to separate the slides of onion root tip cells into the phases of mitosis they represented and label them accordingly. We weren't allowed to use our books. In twenty minutes, he'd be coming around to check our answers.

'Get started,' he commanded.

'Ladies first, partner?' Eryndor asked. I looked up to see him smiling a crooked smile so devastatingly beautiful that I could only stare at him like an idiot.

'Or I could start, if you wish.' The smile faded, replaced by a flicker of concern. He was clearly wondering if I was mentally competent.

'No,' I said, flushing crimson. 'I'll go ahead.'

I was showing off, just a little. I'd already done this lab, and I knew exactly what I was looking for. It should be easy. I snapped the first slide into place under the microscope and quickly adjusted it to the 40X objective. I studied the slide for a brief moment.

My assessment was confident. 'Prophase.'

'Do you mind if I look?' he asked as I began to remove the slide. His hand reached out, catching mine to stop me, as he spoke. His fingers were ice-cold, like he'd been clutching a snowdrift before class. But that wasn't why I yanked my hand away so quickly. When he touched me, it stung my hand as if a

jolt of electric current had passed directly through us.

'I'm sorry,' he muttered, pulling his hand back immediately, though he continued to reach for the microscope. I watched him, still staggered, as he examined the slide for an even shorter time than I had.

'Prophase,' he agreed, writing it neatly in the first space on our worksheet. He swiftly swapped out the first slide for the second, then glanced at it cursorily.

'Anaphase,' he murmured, writing it down as he spoke.

I kept my voice carefully indifferent. 'May I?'

He smirked, a hint of amusement in his eyes, and pushed the microscope toward me.

I looked through the eyepiece eagerly, only to be disappointed. Damn it, he was right.

'Slide three?' I held out my hand without looking at him.

He handed it to me; it felt like he was being meticulously careful not to brush my skin again.

I took the most fleeting look I could manage.

'Interphase.' I passed him the microscope before he could even ask for it. He took a swift peek, then wrote it down. I would have written it while he looked, but his clear, elegant script

intimidated me. I didn't want to spoil the page with my own clumsy scrawl.

We were finished before anyone else was even close. I could see Kaelen and his partner comparing two slides over and over, and another group had their textbook open under the table, clearly cheating.

Which left me with nothing to do but try *not* to look at him... unsuccessfully. I glanced up, and he was staring at me, that same inexplicable look of frustration in his eyes. Suddenly, it clicked. I identified that subtle difference in his face.

'Did you get contacts?' I blurted out, unthinkingly.

He seemed puzzled by my abrupt question.

'No.'

'Oh,' I mumbled, feeling foolish. 'I just thought there was something different about your eyes.'

He shrugged, then looked away, as if dismissing my observation.

But I was sure there was something different. I vividly remembered the flat black color of his eyes the last time he'd glared at me – that striking contrast against his pale skin and auburn hair. Today, his eyes were a completely different hue: a strange ocher, darker than butterscotch, but with the same underlying golden tone. I couldn't comprehend how that was possible, unless he was lying

about contacts for some reason. Or maybe Rockville was genuinely driving me insane.

I looked down. His hands were clenched into hard fists again, resting on the tabletop.

Professor Varek came to our table then, presumably to inquire why we weren't working. He peered over our shoulders, glancing at the completed lab sheet, then stared more intently to double-check our answers.

'So, Eryndor, didn't you think Nevaeh should get a chance with the microscope?' Professor Varek asked, a hint of suspicion in his voice.

'Ava,' Eryndor corrected him automatically. 'Actually, she identified three of the five.'

Professor Varek's gaze shifted to me, his expression skeptical.

'Have you done this lab before?' he asked.

I smiled sheepishly. 'Not with onion root.'

'Whitefish blastula?'

'Yeah.'

Professor Varek nodded. 'Were you in an advanced placement program in Phoenix?'

'Yes.'

'Well,' he said after a moment, a slight smile touching his lips, 'I guess it's good you

two are lab partners.' He mumbled something else as he walked away. After he left, I resumed doodling on my notebook, trying to shake the lingering weirdness.

'It's too bad about the snow, isn't it?' Eryndor asked. I had the distinct feeling he was forcing himself to make small talk with me. Paranoia swept over me again, cold and unsettling. It was as if he'd overheard my conversation with Selene at lunch and was now trying to prove me wrong.

'Not really,' I answered honestly, unable to pretend to be normal like everyone else. I was still trying to dislodge the stupid feeling of suspicion, and it was hard to concentrate.

'You don't like the cold.' It wasn't a question, but a statement of fact.

'Or the wet.'

'Rockville must be a difficult place for you to live,' he mused, his gaze unwavering.

'You have no idea,' I muttered darkly, the words escaping before I could stop them.

He looked fascinated by my bluntness, for some reason I couldn't fathom. His face was such a distraction that I tried not to look at it any more than basic courtesy demanded.

'Why did you come here, then?'

No one had asked me that - not straight out, not with that demanding, almost intense tone.

'It's... complicated.'

'I think I can keep up,' he pressed, a challenge in his voice.

I paused for a long moment, then made the mistake of meeting his gaze. His dark gold eyes seemed to confuse me, and I answered without thinking, simply to break the spell.

'My mother got remarried,' I said.

'That doesn't sound so complex,' he disagreed, but his tone was suddenly sympathetic. 'When did that happen?'

'Last September.' My voice sounded sad, even to my own ears.

'And you don't like him,' Eryndor surmised, his tone still kind, surprisingly gentle.

'No, Phil is fine. Too young, maybe, but nice enough.'

'Why didn't you stay with them?'

I couldn't fathom his interest, but he continued to stare at me with those penetrating eyes, as if my dull, ordinary life story was somehow vitally important to him.

'Phil travels a lot. He plays ball for a living.' I offered a small, half-hearted smile.

'Have I heard of him?' he asked, smiling in response, a flash of those perfect white teeth.

'Probably not. He doesn't play well.
Strictly minor league. He moves around a lot.'

'And your mother sent you here so that she
could travel with him.' He stated it as an
assumption again, not a question, his eyes still
fixed on mine.

My chin raised a fraction. 'No, she did not
send me here. I sent myself.'

His eyebrows knit together, a flicker of
something unreadable crossing his face. 'I
don't understand,' he admitted, and he seemed
unnecessarily frustrated by that fact.

I sighed. Why was I explaining all this to
him? He continued to stare at me with
obvious, almost ravenous, curiosity.

'She stayed with me at first, but she missed him. It made her unhappy... so I decided it was time to spend some quality time with Marcellus.' My voice was glum by the time I finished, the weight of the explanation settling heavily.

'But now you're unhappy,' he pointed out, his voice soft, yet direct.

'And?' I challenged, my guard rising.

'That doesn't seem fair.' He shrugged, a casual gesture, but his eyes were still intense, studying me.

I laughed, a humorless sound. 'Hasn't anyone ever told you? Life isn't fair.'

'I believe I have heard that somewhere before,' he agreed dryly, a faint hint of amusement in his tone.

'So that's all,' I insisted, wondering why he was still staring at me that way, his gaze unsettling.

His gaze became appraising, dissecting. 'You put on a good show,' he said slowly, deliberately. 'But I'd be willing to bet that you're suffering more than you let anyone see.'

I grimaced at him, fighting the childish impulse to stick out my tongue like a five-year-old, and looked away, focusing on the whiteboard.

'Am I wrong?' he pressed, his voice a low murmur.

I tried to ignore him, my jaw tight.

'I didn't think so,' he murmured smugly, a knowing quality in his tone.

'Why does it matter to you?' I asked, irritated, my eyes still fixed on Professor Varek as he made his rounds.

'That's a very good question,' he muttered, so quietly that I wondered if he was talking to himself. However, after a few seconds of silence, I decided that was the only answer I was going to get.

I sighed, scowling at the blackboard, the chalk dust suddenly irritating.

'Am I annoying you?' he asked. He sounded amused, almost playful.

I glanced at him without thinking... and told him the truth, yet again. 'Not exactly. I'm more annoyed at myself. My face is so easy to read - my mother always calls me her open book.' I frowned, a familiar frustration surfacing.

'On the contrary, I find you very difficult to read.' Despite everything I'd said and he'd guessed, he sounded like he genuinely meant it.

'You must be a good reader then,' I replied, a hint of sarcasm in my voice.

'Usually.' He smiled widely, flashing a set of perfect, impossibly white teeth.

Professor Varek called the class to order then, and I turned with a surge of relief to

listen. I was in utter disbelief that I'd just laid out my dreary life story to this bizarre, beautiful boy who may or may not despise me. He'd seemed engrossed in our conversation, but now I could see, from the corner of my eye, that he was leaning away from me again, his hands gripping the edge of the table with unmistakable tension.

I tried to appear attentive as Professor Varek illustrated, with transparencies on the overhead projector, the cellular phases I had seen without difficulty through the microscope. But my thoughts were a swirling, unmanageable mess.

When the bell finally rang, Eryndor rushed from the room as swiftly and as gracefully as he had last Monday. And, just like last

Monday, I stared after him in pure amazement.

Kaelen quickly skipped to my side and, with a flourish, picked up my books for me. I almost imagined him with a wagging tail.

'That was awful,' he groaned, shaking his head. 'They all looked exactly the same. You're lucky you had Ainsley for a partner.'

'I didn't have any trouble with it,' I said, stung by his assumption. I regretted the snub instantly. 'I've done the lab before, though,' I added quickly, before he could get his feelings hurt.

'Ainsley seemed friendly enough today,' he commented as we shrugged into our raincoats. He didn't sound particularly pleased about it.

I tried to sound indifferent. 'I wonder what was with him last Monday.'

I couldn't concentrate on Kaelen's cheerful chatter as we walked to Gym, and RE. didn't do much to hold my attention, either. Kaelen was on my team today. He chivalrously covered my position as well as his own, so my woolgathering was only interrupted when it was my turn to serve; my team ducked warily out of the way every single time I was up.

The rain was just a mist as I walked to the parking lot, but I was happier once I was inside the dry cab of the truck. I got the heater running, for once not caring about the mind-numbing roar of the engine. I unzipped my jacket, pulled the hood down, and fluffed my

damp hair out so the heater could dry it on the way home.

I looked around me, making sure the coast was clear. That's when I noticed the still, white figure. Eryndor Ainsley was leaning against the front door of the Volvo, three cars down from me, staring intently in my direction. I swiftly looked away and jammed the truck into reverse, almost colliding with a rusty Toyota Corolla in my haste. Lucky for the Toyota, I stomped on the brake in time. It was just the sort of car that my truck would make scrap metal of. I took a deep breath, still looking out the other side of my car, and cautiously pulled out again, with greater success. I stared straight ahead as I passed

the Volvo, but from a peripheral peek, I could have sworn I saw him laughing.

Chapter Four: Whisperers of Impossibility

The dream was a fractured kaleidoscope of ice and metal, a symphony of screeching tires and shattering glass. I was there, pinned, helpless, but then *he* was there, a blur of impossible speed, a cold, unyielding force. His golden eyes, impossibly bright, burned through the chaos, and then, just as the van crumpled, his hands, white and strong, held it back, leaving deep, impossible dents. I woke with a gasp, the phantom chill of his touch still prickling my skin, the metallic tang of fear and wonder clinging to my tongue.

Morning light, diffused and muted by the perpetually overcast sky, filtered through my window. It was the same gray-green as yesterday, but the clarity remained. No fog, no mist. Just the stark, undeniable reality of a new day. My mind, however, was anything but clear. The events of yesterday, the impossible, illogical sequence in the parking lot, replayed with relentless precision. The dent in the tan car. The dent in the van. His uninjured body. His cold, cold hands. The blazing, golden eyes that had replaced the black. And his whisper: 'Trust me.'

Marcellus was already gone when I descended, leaving behind the faint aroma of coffee and the comforting silence that had become our peculiar domestic rhythm. I

moved through the house like a ghost, my thoughts heavy, my movements automatic. Cereal, milk, orange juice. The mundane ritual felt like a thin, fragile shield against the encroaching strangeness. I should be grateful to be alive, to be uninjured. I *was* grateful. But gratitude was overshadowed by a churning, desperate need for answers. And a terrifying, undeniable pull towards the source of my confusion.

I should be avoiding him. Every rational neuron in my brain screamed for distance. My brainless babbling, my embarrassing questions, the sheer, unbridgeable chasm between my ordinary existence and his... whatever his was. I was still frightened by the undercurrent of hostility, the subtle threat that

sometimes emanated from him. And yet, the thought of seeing Eryndor Ainsley today, of being in the same space as that impossible, beautiful enigma, sent a shiver of anticipation down my spine that was both thrilling and deeply, profoundly stupid. My league and his league were not merely spheres that did not touch; they were different dimensions entirely.

The drive to school was a blur of hyper-awareness. The snow chains Marcellus had so thoughtfully installed hummed a low, reassuring drone against the asphalt, gripping the black ice with an almost supernatural tenacity. My truck, usually a lumbering beast, felt strangely nimble, a silent accomplice in my journey towards the unknown. I drove slowly, meticulously, not wanting to add to the

already surreal landscape of my life by carving a path of destruction through Main Street.

The parking lot was a scene of hushed aftermath. The van was gone, replaced by a fresh, unmarred patch of asphalt. The tan car was also gone. Only the faint, lingering scent of antifreeze and the memory of shattered glass remained. I parked, my heart thrumming a frantic rhythm against my ribs.

I clung to the side of my truck as I navigated the treacherous ice, my gaze sweeping the familiar faces, searching, always searching, for the one that haunted my thoughts. Kaelen waved from his usual spot, his smile bright, oblivious. Selene was already inside. The normalcy of it all felt like a thin veneer, easily shattered.

My first class, History, was a blur. I took notes, my hand moving mechanically, but my mind was miles away, replaying the crash, Eryndor's impossible strength, the burning gold of his eyes. I tried to focus on the Norman Conquest, but the only conquest I cared about was the one happening in my own head.

During the passing period, I found myself drawn, as if by an invisible string, towards the Biology corridor. I told myself it was to check my locker, to grab a forgotten textbook. But my feet knew better. They were leading me to the place where I had last seen him, where the impossible had unfolded.

He wasn't there. The corridor was busy, filled with the usual cacophony of teenage chatter, but no sign of Eryndor Ainsley. A

strange mix of relief and disappointment washed over me. Relief, because the confrontation I craved also terrified me. Disappointment, because the answers I desperately needed remained elusive.

Lunch was a mundane affair. Kaelen, still buzzing from the snowball fight, recounted exaggerated tales of his 'epic battle' with Zephyr. Selene giggled, her eyes sparkling with admiration for Kaelen's bravado. I picked at my food, a sandwich that tasted like cardboard, my gaze constantly, subtly, sweeping the cafeteria. The Ainsley table in the corner was occupied by Darius, Lyra, Aria, and Thalen. They ate, or rather, *didn't* eat, with their usual detached grace, their

conversations low, almost inaudible. No Eryndor.

'You're quiet today, Ava,' Kaelen observed, his brow furrowed with concern. 'Still feeling sick?'

'Just a little tired,' I mumbled, forcing a weak smile. 'Long night.'

'You should have seen Eryndor in the office,' Selene chimed in, oblivious to the sudden tension that tightened my muscles. 'He was fine, of course. Didn't even have a scratch. But he looked so *annoyed* that they made him wait. Like he had somewhere really important to be.'

My heart gave a strange lurch. Annoyed. Not concerned, not shaken, but *annoyed*. It

was another piece of the puzzle, a jagged edge that didn't fit the picture of a normal human.

After lunch, I found myself in the library again. The same poorly stocked shelves, the same dusty silence. But this time, my purpose was different. I wasn't looking for fiction. I was looking for anything, *anything*, that could explain what I had witnessed. I typed 'unexplained phenomena Rockville PA' into the ancient computer, the dial-up modem groaning its protest. The results were predictably useless: local legends about Bigfoot, fishing reports, and a surprisingly detailed history of the lumber industry. Nothing about super-strong teenagers with shifting eye colors.

I sighed, leaning back in the creaking chair. Maybe I *was* crazy. Maybe the

concussion Eryndor had so readily suggested was real. But the memory of his hands, the cold, the jolt, was too vivid, too visceral to dismiss as a hallucination.

Just as I was about to give up, a shadow fell over my table. The air around me suddenly dropped several degrees, a subtle chill that prickled my skin. I looked up, my breath catching in my throat.

Eryndor Ainsley stood there, leaning against the bookshelf, his arms crossed, his golden eyes fixed on me with that familiar, unsettling intensity. He wasn't smirking, not exactly. There was a hint of something else there, something akin to... curiosity. And frustration.

'Still looking for answers, Ava?' His voice was a low, musical murmur, barely above a whisper, yet it cut through the library's quiet like a sharp blade.

My heart hammered against my ribs, a frantic drum against my bones. 'What are you doing here?' I managed, my voice thin and reedy.

'I could ask you the same thing,' he countered, pushing off the shelf and taking a slow, deliberate step towards my table. The air around him seemed to hum with a strange energy. 'Still trying to figure out what happened yesterday?'

I swallowed, my throat suddenly dry. 'You promised to explain.'

'Did I?' His lips curved into a faint, almost imperceptible smile, a flash of white against his pale skin. 'Or did you just *assume* I would?'

'You said 'Fine', ' I insisted, my voice gaining a desperate edge. 'When I asked if you'd explain everything later.'

He tilted his head slightly, his eyes never leaving mine. 'I said 'Fine' to get you to stop arguing with me in the middle of a public emergency. It wasn't a binding contract.'

A surge of anger, hot and sharp, flared through me. 'You lied!'

'I merely... deferred the truth.' He took another step, and I instinctively pulled my chair back, a small, almost imperceptible

movement. 'Besides, what truth could I possibly tell you that you would believe?'

'Try me,' I challenged, my voice shaking despite my best efforts.

He paused, his gaze sweeping over my face, lingering on my eyes. The intensity of it made my skin prickle. 'You saw what you saw, Ava. Your mind is remarkably... observant. But your understanding is limited by what you believe to be possible.'

'So you *did* stop the van?' The words were out before I could censor them, a desperate plea for confirmation.

His eyes, those impossible golden eyes, darkened almost imperceptibly. 'I did what was necessary.'

'And the dents?'

He glanced down at his hands, then back at me, a flicker of something unreadable in their depths. 'Adrenaline is a powerful thing.'

'Adrenaline doesn't dent steel,' I retorted, my voice flat, devoid of emotion.

He let out a soft, almost inaudible sigh, a sound of profound weariness. 'No, it doesn't.' He leaned forward slightly, his voice dropping to a near whisper. 'Look, Ava. There are things in this world that defy your understanding. Things that are... different. And the less you know about them, the safer you will be.'

'Safer?' I scoffed, a bitter laugh escaping me. 'I was nearly crushed by a van, and you're telling me I'm safer *not* knowing why?'

'Yes,' he said, his voice suddenly firm, unwavering. 'Infinitely safer.'

His gaze was so intense, so compelling, that for a terrifying moment, I almost believed him. Almost. But the image of his hands, holding back tons of metal, flashed in my mind. The coldness. The jolt.

'My eyes,' I whispered, the question burning on my tongue. 'Yesterday, they were black. Today, they're... gold.'

A shadow crossed his face, fleeting but profound. He straightened, pulling back from the table, the chill in the air receding slightly. 'You must be mistaken, Ava. My eyes have always been this color.'

He was lying. The certainty of it hit me with the force of a physical blow. A blatant, undeniable lie. The anger, the frustration, the sheer audacity of it, surged through me. But beneath it, a deeper, more unsettling realization bloomed: he was not just different, he was *hiding* something. Something vast and dangerous.

He turned to leave, his movements fluid, silent, like a predator.

'Wait!' I called out, my voice louder than I intended, echoing slightly in the quiet library.

He paused, his back to me, his shoulders rigid.

'You said... you didn't know why you bothered,' I said, my voice softer now, pleading. 'Why you saved me.'

He remained still for a long moment, then, without turning, he spoke, his voice a low, almost pained whisper. 'I still don't.'

And then he was gone, a phantom in the quiet library, leaving behind only the lingering chill and the overwhelming, terrifying truth of my own growing obsession. That night, the dreams of Eryndor Ainsley were no longer fractured, but vividly, terrifyingly clear.

Chapter Five: Mermers Voices

The dream was a suffocating shroud of darkness, and what meager light pierced it seemed to emanate directly from Eryndor

Ainsley's skin. I couldn't discern his face, only his back, a retreating silhouette, as he walked away from me, abandoning me to the encroaching blackness. No matter how frantically my legs churned, I could never bridge the distance; no matter how desperately I called his name, he never once turned. Troubled, I awoke in the profound stillness of the night, unable to reclaim slumber for what felt like an eternity. After that, he became a recurring phantom in my nocturnal landscapes, always on the periphery, always just beyond my grasp.

The month that followed the accident unfolded with an unsettling tension, a pervasive unease, and, to my profound dismay, an initial, mortifying embarrassment.

I found myself, much to my chagrin, the reluctant epicenter of attention for the remainder of that week. Tyler Crowley, a persistent shadow, became an inescapable presence, obsessed with somehow making amends. I tried, with every ounce of my being, to convince him that my singular desire was for him to simply forget the entire incident – especially since, miraculously, nothing had actually happened to me – but his insistence remained unwavering. He trailed me between classes, a faithful, if unwelcome, dog, and settled himself at our now-crowded lunch table. Kaelen and Zephyr displayed even less cordiality towards him than they did to each other, which only deepened my nagging fear that I had inadvertently acquired another unwanted admirer.

No one, it seemed, harbored any concern for Eryndor, despite my repeated, fervent explanations that he was the true hero – how he had pulled me from the path of destruction and had himself narrowly escaped being crushed. I tried to infuse my voice with conviction. Selene, Kaelen, Zephyr, and everyone else consistently maintained that they hadn't even seen him there until the van was finally pulled away.

A chilling realization dawned upon me, a wave of chagrin washing over my already heightened self-consciousness: why had no one else witnessed him standing so far away, before he had, with impossible swiftness, saved my life? The probable cause, I concluded with a sigh of weary resignation,

was that no one else possessed my acute, almost pathological, awareness of Eryndor. No one else watched him with the same relentless, scrutinizing gaze that I did. How utterly pitiful.

Eryndor was never besieged by throngs of curious bystanders eager for his firsthand account. People avoided him as usual, a wide berth of unspoken apprehension. The Ainsleys and the Hales occupied their customary table, not eating, conversing only amongst themselves, a silent, impenetrable unit. None of them, least of all Eryndor, ever cast a glance in my direction anymore.

When he sat next to me in class, positioned as far from me as the confines of the table would permit, he seemed utterly

oblivious to my presence. Only now and then, when his hands would suddenly clench into tight, rigid fists – the skin stretched even whiter over the prominent bones – did a sliver of doubt pierce his facade of indifference. Was he not quite as oblivious as he appeared?

He wished he hadn't pulled me from the path of Tyler's van – there was no other logical conclusion I could reach.

I yearned, with a desperate, aching intensity, to speak with him. The day after the accident, I made an attempt. The last time I'd seen him, outside the ER, we had both been consumed by a furious, raw anger. I still harbored a simmering resentment that he wouldn't trust me with the truth, even as I flawlessly upheld my end of our unspoken

bargain. But he had, undeniably, saved my life, regardless of the impossible means. And, overnight, the searing heat of my anger had transmuted into a quiet, awed gratitude.

He was already seated when I arrived in Biology, his gaze fixed straight ahead, an impenetrable mask. I slid into my chair, expecting him to turn towards me, to acknowledge my presence. He gave no sign that he even realized I was there.

'Hello, Eryndor,' I said, my voice carefully pleasant, a deliberate attempt to signal my good behavior.

He turned his head a fraction in my direction, without meeting my gaze, offered a

single, curt nod, and then looked away, his attention fixed on some distant point.

And that was the last direct contact I had with him, though he was there, a mere foot away from me, every single day. I watched him sometimes, unable to stop myself – from a distance, though, in the cafeteria or the parking lot. I watched as his golden eyes grew perceptibly darker day by day, losing their warmth, deepening to an almost obsidian hue. But in class, I gave no more indication of his existence than he showed toward mine. I was miserable. And the dreams continued, a nightly torment of his elusive form.

Despite my outright fabrications, the subtle tenor of my emails betrayed my underlying depression to Renée, who called a

few times, her voice laced with worry. I tried to convince her it was merely the oppressive weather that had cast me into this melancholic state.

Kaelen, at least, seemed pleased by the obvious coolness that had settled between me and my lab partner. I could discern his earlier worry that Eryndor's daring rescue might have impressed me, and his palpable relief that it seemed to have achieved the opposite effect. He grew more confident, perching on the edge of my table to engage in conversation before Biology class began, ignoring Eryndor as completely as Eryndor ignored us.

The snow, after that one dangerously icy day, had completely washed away. Kaelen was disappointed his grand snowball fight had

never materialized, but pleased that the beach trip would soon be a tangible possibility. The rain, however, continued its heavy, relentless descent, and the weeks blurred into a monotonous procession.

Selene made me aware of another looming event on the horizon - she called the first Tuesday of March, her voice bubbling with barely contained excitement, to ask my permission to invite Kaelen to the girls' choice spring dance, now just two weeks away.

'Are you absolutely sure you don't mind... you weren't planning to ask him?' she persisted, her voice laced with a hint of suspicion, when I assured her I didn't mind in the least.

'No, Selene, I'm not going,' I confirmed, my voice flat. Dancing, I knew with a painful certainty, lay glaringly outside my meager range of abilities.

'It will be really fun.' Her attempt to convince me was halfhearted, lacking genuine enthusiasm. I suspected that Selene enjoyed my inexplicable, newfound popularity more than my actual company.

'You have fun with Kaelen,' I encouraged, trying to sound genuinely supportive.

The next day, I was surprised to find Selene was not her usual gushing self in Trig and Spanish. She walked silently by my side between classes, her usual effervescence replaced by a quiet brooding, and I was afraid

to ask her why. If Kaelen had rejected her, I was undoubtedly the last person she would want to confide in.

My fears were solidified during lunch when Selene sat as far from Kaelen as possible, engaging in an animated, almost desperate, conversation with Zephyr. Kaelen, for his part, was unusually subdued, picking at his food with a dejected air.

Kaelen remained quiet as he walked me to class, the uncomfortable, almost pained expression on his face a clear bad omen. But he didn't broach the subject until I was settled in my seat and he was perched awkwardly on the edge of my desk. As always, I was electrically aware of Eryndor sitting close

enough to touch, yet as distant as if he were merely a figment of my weary imagination.

'So,' Kaelen began, his gaze fixed on the scuffed floor, 'Selene asked me to the spring dance.'

'That's great.' I forced my voice to be bright and enthusiastic, a performance. 'You'll have a lot of fun with Selene.'

'Well...' He floundered, his eyes flicking to my forced smile, clearly unhappy with my response. 'I told her I had to think about it.'

'Why would you do that?' I allowed a hint of disapproval to color my tone, though a wave of relief washed over me that he hadn't given her an absolute no.

His face flushed a bright, mortified red as he looked down again. Pity, a soft, unwelcome emotion, shook my resolve.

'I was wondering if... well, if you might be planning to ask me.'

I paused for a moment, hating the familiar wave of guilt that swept through me. But then, from the corner of my eye, I saw Eryndor's head tilt, a subtle, almost imperceptible movement in my direction.

'Kaelen, I think you should tell her yes,' I said, my voice firm despite the internal turmoil.

'Did you already ask someone?' Did Eryndor notice how Kaelen's eyes flickered, almost instinctively, in his direction?

'No,' I assured him, my gaze unwavering.
'I'm not going to the dance at all.'

'Why not?' Kaelen demanded, his voice
laced with disappointment.

I didn't want to delve into the sheer safety
hazards that dancing presented, so I quickly
fabricated new plans.

'I'm going to Seattle that Saturday,' I
explained, the lie feeling surprisingly natural. I
needed to escape this town anyway - it was
suddenly the perfect, undeniable excuse.

'Can't you go some other weekend?' he
pressed, still hopeful.

'Sorry, no,' I said, a finality in my tone. 'So you shouldn't make Selene wait any longer - it's rude.'

'Yeah, you're right,' he mumbled, his shoulders slumping in dejection, and he turned, trudging back to his seat. I closed my eyes and pressed my fingers to my temples, trying to physically push the guilt and unwanted sympathy out of my head. Professor Varek's voice began its familiar drone. I sighed and opened my eyes.

And Eryndor was staring at me, a curious, almost probing intensity in his gaze, that same, familiar edge of frustration even more distinct now in his black eyes.

I stared back, surprised, expecting him to quickly avert his gaze. But instead, he continued to gaze with a relentless, probing intensity into my eyes. There was no question of me looking away; I was trapped, mesmerized. My hands began to tremble, a nervous tremor I couldn't control.

'Mr. Ainsley?' the teacher called, seeking the answer to a question that I hadn't even registered.

'The Krebs Cycle,' Eryndor answered, his voice sounding oddly reluctant as he finally turned to look at Professor Varek.

I looked down at my book as soon as his eyes released me, trying to find my place, to regain some semblance of composure.

Cowardly as ever, I shifted my hair over my right shoulder, a pathetic attempt to hide my flushed face. I couldn't believe the rush of raw emotion pulsing through me – just because he'd happened to look at me for the first time in a half-dozen weeks. I couldn't allow him to wield this level of influence over me. It was pathetic. More than pathetic, it was profoundly unhealthy.

I tried very hard not to be aware of him for the remainder of the hour, and, since that proved utterly impossible, at least not to betray my awareness of him. When the bell finally rang, a welcome clang, I turned my back to him to gather my things, fully expecting him to vanish immediately as was his custom.

'Ava?' His voice shouldn't have been so intimately familiar to me, as if I'd known the sound of it all my life rather than for just a few short, bewildering weeks.

I turned slowly, unwillingly, a deep reluctance in my movements. I didn't want to feel what I knew I would feel when I looked at his too-perfect face. My expression was wary when I finally faced him; his, however, remained utterly unreadable, a blank, beautiful mask. He didn't say anything.

'What? Are you speaking to me again?' I finally asked, an unintentional note of petulance, almost a whine, in my voice.

His lips twitched, fighting a smile, a fleeting battle against amusement. 'No, not really,' he admitted, his voice a low murmur.

I closed my eyes and inhaled slowly through my nose, acutely aware that I was clenching my teeth, a silent grind of frustration. He waited, patiently.

'Then what do you want, Eryndor?' I asked, keeping my eyes closed; it was easier to talk to him coherently that way, to maintain some semblance of control.

'I'm sorry.' He sounded genuinely sincere, a surprising note of contrition. 'I'm being very rude, I know. But it's better this way, really.'

I opened my eyes. His face was very serious, devoid of any trace of the earlier amusement.

'I don't know what you mean,' I said, my voice guarded, a fortress against his words.

'It's better if we're not friends,' he explained, his gaze unwavering. 'Trust me.'

My eyes narrowed. I'd heard that before. The phrase, a cruel echo, stung.

'It's too bad you didn't figure that out earlier,' I hissed through my teeth, a raw, bitter edge to my voice. 'You could have saved yourself all this regret.'

'Regret?' The word, and my biting tone, clearly caught him off guard. A flicker of

genuine astonishment crossed his face.

'Regret for what?'

'For not just letting that stupid van squish me.'

He was astonished, truly. He stared at me in disbelief, his perfect features momentarily fractured by shock.

When he finally spoke, his voice was low, almost a growl, laced with a cold fury. 'You think I regret saving your life?'

'I know you do,' I snapped, my own anger rising to meet his.

'You don't know anything.' He was definitely mad now, his eyes blazing.

I turned my head sharply away from him, clenching my jaw against all the wild, irrational accusations I wanted to hurl at him. I gathered my books together, then stood and walked to the door. I intended to sweep dramatically out of the room, a grand exit, but of course, my innate clumsiness asserted itself. I caught the toe of my boot on the door jamb and dropped my books with a humiliating clatter. I stood there for a moment, contemplating the sheer defiance of leaving them scattered on the floor. Then I sighed, a sound of utter defeat, and bent to pick them up. He was there; he'd already stacked them into a neat pile. He handed them to me, his face hard, unyielding.

'Thank you,' I said icily, the words like shards of ice.

His eyes narrowed, a subtle tightening of the golden irises.

'You're welcome,' he retorted, his voice equally frigid.

I straightened up swiftly, turned away from him again, and stalked off to Gym without a single backward glance.

Gym was brutal. We'd moved on to basketball, a sport that highlighted every one of my physical deficiencies. My team never passed me the ball, which was a small mercy, but I still managed to fall down a lot.

Sometimes, I inadvertently took other people with me. Today, I was worse than usual, my

head so utterly consumed by Eryndor. I tried to concentrate on my feet, on the simple act of putting one in front of the other, but he kept creeping back into my thoughts just when I desperately needed my balance.

It was a profound relief, as always, to finally leave the echoing gymnasium. I almost ran to the truck; there were just so many people I wanted to avoid, so many lingering questions in their eyes. The truck had, miraculously, suffered only minimal damage in the accident. I'd had to replace the taillights, and if I'd had a real paint job, I would have touched up the scuff marks. Tyler's parents, I'd heard, had been forced to sell their van for parts.

I almost had a stroke when I rounded the corner and saw a tall, dark figure leaning casually against the side of my truck. Then, with a jolt of recognition, I realized it was just Zephyr. I resumed my walk, my heart rate slowly returning to normal.

'Hey, Zephyr,' I called, a forced cheerfulness in my voice.

'Hi, Ava.'

'What's up?' I said as I fumbled with the key to unlock the door. I wasn't paying close enough attention to the uncomfortable edge in his voice, so his next words took me completely by surprise.

'Uh, I was just wondering... if you would go to the spring dance with me?' His voice

cracked on the last word, a clear sign of his nervousness.

'I thought it was girls' choice,' I said, too startled to be diplomatic, my brow furrowed.

'Well, yeah,' he admitted, shamefaced, his gaze dropping to his scuffed shoes.

I quickly recovered my composure and tried to make my smile warm, apologetic. 'Thank you for asking me, Zephyr, but I'm going to be in Seattle that day.'

'Oh,' he said, the single syllable heavy with disappointment. 'Well, maybe next time.'

'Sure,' I agreed, then bit my lip, instantly regretting the implied promise. I wouldn't want him to take that too literally.

He slouched off, his shoulders slumped, heading back toward the school building. I heard a low, rich chuckle, a sound that sent a familiar shiver down my spine.

Eryndor Ainsley was walking past the front of my truck, looking straight forward, his lips pressed together in a valiant effort to suppress his amusement. I yanked the door open and practically leaped inside, slamming it loudly behind me. I revved the engine deafeningly, the truck's roar a defiant challenge, and reversed out into the aisle. Eryndor was already in his car, two spaces down, sliding out smoothly in front of me, cutting me off with an almost deliberate precision. He stopped there – ostensibly to wait for his family; I could see the four of them walking

this way, still by the cafeteria. I considered, for a fleeting, dangerous moment, taking out the rear of his shiny Volvo, but there were far too many witnesses. I looked in my rearview mirror. A line of cars was already beginning to form behind me. Directly behind me, Tyler Crowley was in his recently acquired used Sentra, waving awkwardly. I was too aggravated to even acknowledge him.

While I sat there, my gaze darting everywhere but at the gleaming car in front of me, I heard a soft knock on my passenger side window. I looked over; it was Tyler. I glanced back in my rearview mirror, confused. His car was still running, the door left open. I leaned across the cab to crank the window down. It was stiff, resisting my efforts. I got it halfway

down, then gave up, a frustrated sigh escaping me.

'I'm sorry, Tyler, I'm stuck behind Ainsley.' I was annoyed – obviously, the holdup wasn't my fault.

'Oh, I know – I just wanted to ask you something while we're trapped here.' He grinned, a hopeful, almost desperate, expression on his bandaged face.

This could not be happening.

'Will you ask me to the spring dance?' he continued, his voice earnest.

'I'm not going to be in town, Tyler.' My voice sounded a little sharp, a little strained. I had to remind myself it wasn't his fault that

Kaelen and Zephyr had already consumed my entire quota of patience for the day.

'Yeah, Kaelen said that,' he admitted, his smile faltering.

'Then why -'

He shrugged, a helpless gesture. 'I was hoping you were just letting him down easy.'

Okay, it was completely his fault.

'Sorry, Tyler,' I said, working diligently to hide my irritation, to maintain a semblance of politeness. 'I really am going out of town.'

'That's cool. We still have prom.'

And before I could respond, he was already walking back to his car, his mission

accomplished. I could feel the shock, a cold, numb sensation, on my face. I looked forward to see Lyra, Aria, Darius, and Thalen all sliding into the Volvo. In his rearview mirror, Eryndor's eyes were on me. He was unquestionably shaking with silent laughter, as if he'd heard every single word Tyler had uttered. My foot itched towards the gas pedal... one little bump wouldn't hurt any of them, just that glossy silver paint job. I revved the engine, a low growl.

But they were all in, and Eryndor was speeding away, a silver blur vanishing into the rain. I drove home slowly, meticulously, muttering to myself the whole way, the conversation replaying in my mind.

When I finally pulled into the driveway, I decided to make chicken enchiladas for dinner. It was a long, involved process, and it would keep my hands busy, my mind distracted. While I was simmering the onions and chilies, the phone rang, a jarring sound in the quiet house. I was almost afraid to answer it, but it might be Marcellus or my mom.

It was Selene, and she was jubilant; Kaelen had caught her after school to accept her invitation. I celebrated with her briefly, stirring the fragrant mixture on the stove. She had to go, she wanted to call Angela and Lauren to share the good news. I suggested - with a casual innocence I didn't truly feel - that maybe Angela, the shy girl who had Biology with me, could ask Zephyr. And

Lauren, a standoffish girl who had always ignored me at the lunch table, could ask Tyler; I'd heard he was still available. Selene thought that was a brilliant idea. Now that she was sure of Kaelen, she actually sounded sincere when she said she wished I would go to the dance. I reiterated my Seattle excuse.

After I hung up, I tried to concentrate on dinner - dicing the chicken especially; I had no desire to take another trip to the emergency room. But my head was spinning, trying to analyze every single word Eryndor had spoken today. What did he mean, it was better if we weren't friends?

My stomach twisted as the sickening realization dawned. He must see how utterly absorbed I was by him; he must not want to

lead me on... so we couldn't even be friends...
because he wasn't interested in me at all.

Of course he wasn't interested in me, I
thought angrily, my eyes stinging - a delayed
reaction to the onions, I told myself. I wasn't
interesting. And he was. Interesting... and
brilliant... and mysterious... and perfect... and
beautiful... and possibly able to lift full-sized
vans with one hand.

Well, that was fine. I could leave him
alone. I would leave him alone. I would get
through my self-imposed sentence here in
purgatory, and then hopefully some school in
the Southwest, or possibly Hawaii, would offer
me a scholarship. I focused my thoughts on
sunny beaches and swaying palm trees as I

finished assembling the enchiladas and slid them into the oven.

Marcellus seemed suspicious when he came home and the unfamiliar aroma of green peppers filled the air. I couldn't blame him - the closest edible Mexican food was probably somewhere in southern California. But he was a cop, even if just a small-town cop, so he was brave enough to take the first bite. He seemed to genuinely like it. It was oddly fun to watch as he slowly began trusting my culinary abilities.

'Dad?' I asked when he was almost done, the formal address feeling strange.

'Yeah, Ava?'

'Um, I just wanted to let you know that I'm going to Seattle for the day a week from Saturday... if that's okay?' I didn't want to ask permission – it set a bad precedent – but I felt a flicker of politeness, so I tacked it on at the end.

'Why?' He sounded genuinely surprised, as if he were utterly unable to imagine anything that Rockville couldn't offer.

'Well, I wanted to get a few books – the library here is pretty limited – and maybe look at some clothes.' I had more money than I was used to having, since, thanks to Marcellus, I hadn't had to pay for a car. Not that the truck didn't cost me quite a bit in the gas department.

'That truck probably doesn't get very good gas mileage,' he said, echoing my earlier, silent thought.

'I know, I'll stop in Montesano and Olympia – and Tacoma if I have to.'

'Are you going all by yourself?' he asked, and I couldn't tell if he was suspicious I had a secret boyfriend or just genuinely worried about car trouble.

'Yes.'

'Seattle is a big city – you could get lost,' he fretted, a familiar paternal anxiety creeping into his voice.

'Dad, Phoenix is five times the size of Seattle – and I can read a map, don't worry about it.'

'Do you want me to come with you?'

I tried to be crafty as I hid my utter horror at the suggestion.

'That's all right, Dad, I'll probably just be in dressing rooms all day – very boring.'

'Oh, okay.' The mere thought of sitting in women's clothing stores for any prolonged period of time immediately put him off.

'Thanks.' I offered him a grateful smile.

'Will you be back in time for the dance?'

Grrr. Only in a town this small would a father know precisely when the high school dances were scheduled.

'No - I don't dance, Dad.' He, of all people, should understand that - I didn't get my balance problems from my mother.

He did understand, a flicker of recognition in his eyes. 'Oh, that's right,' he realized, then nodded slowly.

The next morning, when I pulled into the parking lot, I deliberately parked as far as humanly possible from the gleaming silver Volvo. I had no desire to put myself in the path of too much temptation and end up owing him a new car. Getting out of the cab, I fumbled with my key, and, with a sickening plink, it fell

into a shallow puddle at my feet. As I bent to retrieve it, a white hand flashed out, impossibly swift, and snatched it before my fingers could even brush the cold water. I jerked upright, startled. Eryndor Ainsley was right next to me, leaning casually against my truck, a phantom in the morning mist.

'How do you do that?' I asked, a mix of amazement and irritation in my voice.

'Do what?' He held my key out as he spoke, his gaze steady. As I reached for it, he dropped it into my palm, his fingers brushing mine with that familiar, chilling jolt.

'Appear out of thin air.'

'Ava, it's not my fault if you are exceptionally unobservant.' His voice was

quiet as usual – velvet, muted, yet carrying a surprising weight.

I scowled at his perfect, infuriating face. His eyes were light again today, a deep, golden honey color, almost luminous. Then I had to look down, to reassemble my now-tangled thoughts, to regain some semblance of mental clarity.

'Why the traffic jam last night?' I demanded, still looking away, my voice tight. 'I thought you were supposed to be pretending I don't exist, not irritating me to death.'

'That was for Tyler's sake, not mine. I had to give him his chance.' He snickered, a low, amused sound.

'You...' I gasped, my mind scrambling for a sufficiently scathing epithet. It felt like the heat of my anger should physically burn him, but he only seemed more amused, a faint smile playing on his lips.

'And I'm not pretending you don't exist,' he continued, his voice a silken thread.

'So you are trying to irritate me to death? Since Tyler's van didn't do the job?'

Anger, cold and sharp, flashed in his tawny eyes. His lips pressed into a hard, thin line, all traces of humor vanishing from his face.

'Ava, you are utterly absurd,' he said, his low voice suddenly cold, cutting.

My palms tingled, a strange, almost electric sensation – I wanted so badly to hit something. I was surprised at myself. I was usually a nonviolent person, preferring retreat to confrontation. I turned my back abruptly and started to walk away, the rain a cold balm on my face.

'Wait,' he called, his voice clear despite the drumming rain. I kept walking, sloshing angrily through the puddles. But he was suddenly next to me, easily keeping pace, his movements impossibly silent.

'I'm sorry, that was rude,' he said as we walked, his voice a low murmur. I ignored him, my jaw tight. 'I'm not saying it isn't true,' he continued, a hint of dry amusement returning, 'but it was rude to say it, anyway.'

'Why won't you leave me alone?' I grumbled, my voice thick with frustration.

'I wanted to ask you something, but you sidetracked me,' he chuckled, a soft, musical sound. He seemed to have recovered his good humor, his earlier anger dissipating like mist.

'Do you have a multiple personality disorder?' I asked severely, wheeling to face him, my face getting drenched as I looked up at his expression.

His eyes were wickedly amused, glinting like polished gold. 'Will you please allow me to finish?'

I bit my lip and clasped my hands together, interlocking my fingers, a desperate

attempt to prevent myself from doing anything rash.

'I heard you say you were going to Seattle that day, and I was wondering if you wanted a ride.'

That was unexpected. Utterly, completely unexpected.

'What?' I wasn't sure what he was getting at, my mind reeling.

'Do you want a ride to Seattle?' he repeated, his voice patient.

'With who?' I asked, mystified, my confusion deepening.

'Myself, obviously.' He enunciated every syllable, as if he were talking to someone

mentally handicapped, a faint, patronizing smile touching his lips.

I was still stunned, my brain struggling to process the offer. 'Why?'

'Well, I was planning to go to Seattle in the next few weeks, and, to be honest, I'm not sure if your truck can make it.'

'My truck works just fine, thank you very much for your concern.' I started to walk again, a surge of indignation propelling me forward, but I was too surprised by his offer to maintain the same level of anger.

'But can your truck make it there on one tank of gas?' He matched my pace again, effortlessly.

'I don't see how that is any of your business.' Stupid, shiny Volvo owner.

'The wasting of finite resources is everyone's business.' His voice was utterly serious now, devoid of humor.

'Honestly, Eryndor.' I felt a strange thrill go through me as I said his name, a forbidden spark, and I hated it. 'I can't keep up with you. I thought you didn't want to be my friend.'

'I said it would be better if we weren't friends, not that I didn't want to be.'

'Oh, thanks, now that's all cleared up.' Heavy, dripping sarcasm. I realized I had stopped walking again. We were under the shelter of the cafeteria roof now, the rain a distant drumming, so I could more easily look

at his face. Which, of course, did absolutely nothing to help my clarity of thought.

'It would be more... prudent for you not to be my friend,' he explained, his voice dropping, becoming a low, intimate murmur. 'But I'm tired of trying to stay away from you, Ava.'

His eyes were gloriously intense as he uttered that last sentence, his voice smoldering, a deep, resonant hum that vibrated through me. I couldn't remember how to breathe.

'Will you go with me to Seattle?' he asked, his gaze still intense, unwavering, demanding an answer.

I couldn't speak yet, my throat tight, my mind a blank. So I just nodded, a small, almost imperceptible movement.

He smiled briefly, a flash of dazzling white, and then his face became serious again, the intensity returning to his eyes.

'You really should stay away from me,' he warned, his voice low, a chilling undercurrent beneath the musical tone. 'I'll see you in class.'

He turned abruptly and walked back the way we'd come, leaving me standing alone, drenched by the rain and a sudden, overwhelming sense of the impossible.

Chapter Six: Dive Home

I spun and caught the door before it closed, darting out of the infirmary, a sudden, desperate urge for fresh air propelling me forward. I could feel Eryndor Ainsley right behind me, his presence a silent, unnerving shadow.

'You actually listened to me.' His voice was a low murmur, laced with genuine astonishment, a hint of surprise that I had obeyed his unspoken command.

'I smelled the blood,' I said, wrinkling my nose in distaste, the metallic tang still lingering in the air. Lee wasn't sick from watching other people, like me.

'People can't smell blood,' he contradicted, his brow furrowed, a hint of skepticism in his tone, a subtle challenge to my assertion.

'Well, I can - that's what makes me sick. It smells like rust... and salt.' I shuddered, the memory of the scent making my stomach churn anew.

He was staring at me with an unfathomable expression, his golden eyes wide, unreadable, a strange intensity in their depths.

'What?' I asked, a nervous tremor in my voice, unnerved by his silent scrutiny.

'It's nothing.' He dismissed it with a wave of his hand, a casual gesture that belied the intensity of his gaze.

Kaelen came through the door then, his eyes darting from me to Eryndor, a quick, assessing glance. The look he gave Eryndor confirmed everything Eryndor had said about loathing, a raw, undisguised animosity. He looked back at me, his eyes glum, a picture of dejection, his shoulders slumped.

'You look better,' he accused, his voice tinged with a strange resentment, as if my recovery was a personal affront.

'Just keep your hand in your pocket,' I warned him again, my gaze pointedly at his still-reddened finger, a silent reminder of his own discomfort.

'It's not bleeding anymore,' he muttered, a faint pout on his lips. 'Are you going back to class?'

'Are you kidding? I'd just have to turn around and come back.' I shook my head, the thought of returning to that bloody scene unbearable.

'Yeah, I guess... So are you going this weekend? To the beach?' While he spoke, he flashed another glare toward Eryndor, who was standing against the cluttered counter, motionless as a sculpture, staring off into space, seemingly oblivious to Kaelen's animosity.

I tried to sound as friendly as possible, to soothe his bruised ego, to make up for my earlier rejection. 'Sure, I said I was in.'

'We're meeting at my dad's store, at ten.'

His eyes flickered to Eryndor again, a quick, nervous glance, wondering if he was giving out too much information, if he was overstepping. His body language made it abundantly clear that it wasn't an open invitation, a silent warning to Eryndor.

'I'll be there,' I promised, a small, genuine smile.

'I'll see you in Gym, then,' he said, moving uncertainly toward the door, his shoulders still slumped, a picture of teenage angst.

'See you,' I replied. He looked at me once more, his round face slightly pouting, and then as he walked slowly through the door, his shoulders slumped further, a profound dejection in his posture. A swell of sympathy, unexpected and unwelcome, washed over me. I pondered seeing his disappointed face again... in Gym.

'Gym,' I groaned, a genuine lament, the thought of physical exertion unbearable.

'I can take care of that.' I hadn't noticed Eryndor moving to my side, but he spoke now, his voice a low, conspiratorial murmur in my ear. 'Go sit down and look pale,' he muttered, a hint of amusement in his tone.

That wasn't a challenge; I was always pale, a natural state, and my recent swoon had left a light sheen of sweat on my face, a visible sign of my distress. I sank into one of the creaky folding chairs and rested my head against the wall, closing my eyes, the exhaustion a heavy cloak. Fainting spells, I knew from experience, always drained me completely.

I heard Eryndor speaking softly at the counter, his voice a melodic hum, smooth and persuasive.

'Ms. Cope?'

'Yes?' I hadn't heard her return to her desk, her movements surprisingly silent.

'Ava Nattalie has Gym next hour, and I don't think she feels well enough. Actually, I was thinking I should take her home now. Do you think you could excuse her from class?' His voice was like melting honey, utterly charming, utterly irresistible. I could imagine how much more overwhelming his eyes would be, adding to the irresistible charm, sealing the deal.

'Do you need to be excused, too, Eryndor?' Ms. Cope fluttered, her voice suddenly breathless, clearly charmed, her professionalism momentarily forgotten. Why couldn't I do that?

'No, I have Mrs. Goff, she won't mind.'

'Okay, it's all taken care of. You feel better, Ava Nattalie,' she called to me, her voice sweet, saccharine. I nodded weakly, hamming it up just a bit, playing the part of the fragile invalid, a silent accomplice.

'Can you walk, or do you want me to carry you again?' With his back to the receptionist, his expression became openly sarcastic, a wicked glint in his eyes, a private joke shared between us.

'I'll walk.'

I stood carefully, testing my balance, and I was still fine, the dizziness having completely receded. He held the door for me, his smile polite, almost formal, but his eyes were mocking, filled with a knowing amusement. I

walked out into the cold, fine mist that had just begun to fall, a gentle, almost imperceptible rain. It felt nice – the first time I'd ever enjoyed the constant moisture falling from the sky – as it washed my face clean of the sticky perspiration, a refreshing balm, a small comfort.

'Thanks,' I said as he followed me out, his presence a silent shadow. 'It's almost worth getting sick to miss Gym.'

'Anytime.' He was staring straight forward, squinting into the rain, his expression unreadable, a perfect mask.

'So are you going? This Saturday, I mean?' I was hoping he would, though it seemed profoundly unlikely. I couldn't picture him

loading up to carpool with the rest of the kids from school; he simply didn't belong in the same world, the same mundane reality. But just hoping that he might, that there was a chance, gave me the first genuine twinge of enthusiasm I'd felt for the outing, a spark of excitement.

'Where are you all going, exactly?' He was still looking ahead, his face expressionless, a perfect mask.

'Down to La Push, to First Beach.' I studied his face, trying desperately to read it, to find some crack in his composure, some hint of emotion. His eyes seemed to narrow infinitesimally, a subtle tightening around the irises, a flicker of something.

He glanced down at me from the corner of his eye, a wry, knowing smile playing on his lips. 'I really don't think I was invited.'

I sighed, a frustrated sound. 'I just invited you.'

'Let's you and I not push poor Kaelen any further this week. We don't want him to snap.' His eyes danced, a mischievous glint in their golden depths; he was enjoying the idea far more than he should, a perverse satisfaction.

'Kaelen-schmike.' I muttered, dismissing the thought, preoccupied by the way he'd said 'you and I.' I liked it more than I should, the simple conjunction holding a dangerous, forbidden allure.

We were near the parking lot now. I instinctively veered left, towards my truck. Something caught my jacket, a sudden, firm tug, yanking me back with surprising force.

'Where do you think you're going?' he asked, his voice laced with outrage, a genuine indignation. He was gripping a fistful of my jacket in one hand, his fingers surprisingly strong, unyielding.

I was confused, my brow furrowed. 'I'm going home.'

'Didn't you hear me promise to take you safely home? Do you think I'm going to let you drive in your condition?' His voice was still indignant, a righteous accusation, a tone of disbelief.

'What condition? And what about my truck?' I complained, my irritation flaring, a futile protest.

'I'll have Lyra drop it off after school.' He was towing me toward his car now, pulling me by my jacket, a relentless, irresistible force. It was all I could do to keep from falling backward. He'd probably just drag me along anyway if I did.

'Let go!' I insisted, my voice sharp. He ignored me, his grip unwavering. I staggered along sideways across the wet sidewalk until we reached the gleaming Volvo. Then he finally freed me – I stumbled against the passenger door, a clumsy heap, my dignity in tatters.

'You are so pushy!' I grumbled, rubbing my arm, a lingering ache.

'It's open,' was all he responded, his voice flat, devoid of emotion. He got in the driver's side, his movements fluid and silent, a study in effortless grace.

'I am perfectly capable of driving myself home!' I stood by the car, fuming, my anger a hot, useless thing. It was raining harder now, a sheeting downpour, and I'd never bothered to put my hood up, so my hair was plastered to my head, dripping down my back, a cold, uncomfortable sensation.

He lowered the automatic window, the hum a soft counterpoint to the rain, and leaned toward me across the seat, his golden

eyes fixed on mine, a silent command. 'Ava Nattalie, get in.'

I didn't answer, my gaze fixed on his. I was mentally calculating my chances of reaching the truck before he could catch me. I had to admit, with a sigh of defeat, they weren't good.

'I'll just drag you back,' he threatened, his voice low, a knowing amusement in his tone, as if he'd guessed my exact plan, my futile rebellion.

I tried to maintain what little dignity I could as I got into his car, sliding onto the plush leather seat. I wasn't very successful – I looked like a half-drowned cat, and my boots

squeaked a pathetic protest against the floor mats.

'This is completely unnecessary,' I said stiffly, my voice tight, a forced composure.

He didn't answer. He fiddled with the controls, turning the heater up, a blast of warm air, and the music down, the classical melody softening to a gentle hum. As he pulled out of the parking lot, the tires a whisper against the wet asphalt, I was preparing to give him the silent treatment – my face set in full pout mode – but then I recognized the music playing, and my insatiable curiosity got the better of my intentions, overriding my stubbornness.

'Clair de Lune?' I asked, surprised, the name a soft question, a flicker of recognition.

'You know Debussy?' He sounded surprised, too, a flicker of genuine interest in his eyes.

'Not well,' I admitted. 'My mother plays a lot of classical music around the house - I only know my favorites.'

'It's one of my favorites, too.' He stared out through the rain-streaked windshield, lost in thought, a distant look in his eyes, a private world.

I listened to the music, letting the familiar, soothing melody wash over me, relaxing against the light gray leather seat. It was impossible not to respond to its gentle beauty,

its calming rhythm. The rain blurred everything outside the window into soft gray and green smudges, a watercolor world, indistinct and fleeting. I began to realize we were driving very fast; the car moved so steadily, so evenly, though, that I didn't feel the speed, only the town flashing by in a rapid succession of blurred shapes, a testament to the car's unnatural smoothness.

'What is your mother like?' he asked me suddenly, his voice cutting through the music, a sharp, unexpected question.

I glanced over to see him studying me with curious, probing eyes, his gaze intense.

'She looks a lot like me, but she's prettier,' I said. He raised his eyebrows, a silent

question, a hint of skepticism. 'I have too much Marcellus in me. She's more outgoing than I am, and braver. She's irresponsible and slightly eccentric, and she's a very unpredictable cook. She's my best friend.' I stopped, a sudden lump in my throat. Talking about her was making me depressed, a familiar melancholy.

'How old are you, Ava Nattalie?' His voice sounded frustrated for some reason I couldn't imagine, a subtle tension in his tone. He'd stopped the car, and I realized, with a jolt, that we were at Marcellus's house already. The rain was so heavy that I could barely see the house at all, a vague, indistinct shape through the downpour. It was like the car was

submerged under a rushing river, a watery tomb.

'I'm seventeen,' I responded, a little confused by the abrupt question, its seemingly random nature.

'You don't seem seventeen.'

His tone was reproachful, almost a chiding, a subtle criticism. It made me laugh, a short, humorless sound, a nervous release.

'What?' he asked, curious again, his gaze softening, a hint of amusement.

'My mom always says I was born thirty-five years old and that I get more middle-aged every year.' I laughed, a genuine, if weary, sound, and then sighed. 'Well, someone has to

be the adult.' I paused for a second, a fleeting thought. 'You don't seem much like a junior in high school yourself,' I noted, my eyes narrowing slightly, a hint of suspicion.

He made a face, a quick, almost imperceptible grimace, and abruptly changed the subject, a clear deflection.

'So why did your mother marry Phil?'

I was surprised he would remember the name; I'd mentioned it just once, almost two months ago, a fleeting detail. It took me a moment to formulate an answer, to gather my thoughts.

'My mother... she's very young for her age. I think Phil makes her feel even younger. At any rate, she's crazy about him.' I shook my

head, a small, involuntary gesture. The attraction was, and remained, a profound mystery to me.

'Do you approve?' he asked, his voice low, probing, seeking my true feelings.

'Does it matter?' I countered, a hint of defiance in my tone. 'I want her to be happy... and he is who she wants.'

'That's very generous... I wonder,' he mused, his voice trailing off, lost in thought, a private rumination.

'What?' I prompted, my curiosity piqued, eager for him to continue.

'Would she extend the same courtesy to you, do you think? No matter who your choice

was?' He was suddenly intent, his eyes searching mine with a piercing intensity, as if seeking a profound truth, a glimpse into my soul.

'I-I think so,' I stuttered, the question unsettling me, probing a sensitive spot. 'But she's the parent, after all. It's a little bit different.'

'No one too scary then,' he teased, a faint smile playing on his lips, a hint of something more.

I grinned in response, a genuine smile this time. 'What do you mean by scary? Multiple facial piercings and extensive tattoos?'

'That's one definition, I suppose.'

'What's your definition?' I pressed, eager for his answer, for a glimpse into his mind.

But he ignored my question, a subtle shift in his gaze, and asked me another instead. 'Do you think that I could be scary?' He raised one eyebrow, and the faint trace of a smile lightened his face, making him seem less intimidating, more approachable.

I thought for a moment, weighing the options, wondering whether the truth or a lie would go over better, which would elicit the most revealing response. I decided to go with the truth, a risky gamble. 'Hmmm... I think you could be, if you wanted to.'

'Are you frightened of me now?' The smile vanished instantly, and his heavenly face was

abruptly serious, his golden eyes unblinking, searching mine, demanding an honest answer.

'No.' But I answered too quickly, the word escaping before I could fully process it, a reflex. The smile, faint but distinct, returned to his lips.

'So, now are you going to tell me about your family?' I asked, quickly changing the subject, hoping to distract him, to shift the focus away from myself. 'It's got to be a much more interesting story than mine.'

He was instantly cautious, his posture tensing, his eyes narrowing imperceptibly, a clear sign of his reluctance. 'What do you want to know?'

'The Ainsleys adopted you?' I verified, a direct question, seeking confirmation.

'Yes.' His voice was clipped, almost curt, a hint of finality.

I hesitated for a moment, sensing his reluctance, the unspoken barriers. 'What happened to your parents?'

'They died many years ago.' His tone was matter-of-fact, devoid of emotion, a flat statement, a closed book.

'I'm sorry,' I mumbled, a genuine note of sympathy in my voice.

'I don't really remember them that clearly. Carlisle and Esme have been my parents for a long time now.'

'And you love them.' It wasn't a question. It was obvious in the soft, almost reverent way he spoke of them, the subtle warmth in his voice, the tenderness in his eyes.

'Yes.' He smiled, a genuine, unburdened smile. 'I couldn't imagine two better people.'

'You're very lucky.'

'I know I am.'

'And your brother and sister?'

He glanced at the clock on the dashboard, a subtle shift of his gaze, a hint of impatience.

'My brother and sister, and Thalen and Aria for that matter, are going to be quite upset if they have to stand in the rain waiting for me.'

'Oh, sorry, I guess you have to go.' I didn't want to get out of the car, the thought of leaving his presence a sudden, sharp pain, a reluctance to break the spell.

'And you probably want your truck back before Chief Marcellus gets home, so you don't have to tell him about the Biology incident.' He grinned at me, a knowing glint in his eyes.

'I'm sure he's already heard. There are no secrets in Rockville.' I sighed, a weary resignation in my voice, a recognition of the town's pervasive gossip.

He laughed, a low, musical sound, and there was an edge to his laughter, a hint of something dark and amused, a private joke.

'Have fun at the beach... good weather for sunbathing.' He glanced out at the sheeting rain, a sarcastic curl of his lips, a clear mockery of the idea.

'Won't I see you tomorrow?' I asked, a desperate hope in my voice, clinging to the possibility, to prolong this strange connection.

'No. Darius and I are starting the weekend early.'

'What are you going to do?' A friend could ask that, right? I hoped the disappointment wasn't too apparent in my voice, that I wasn't betraying too much.

'We're going to be hiking in the Goat Rocks Wilderness, just south of Rainier.'

I remembered Marcellus had said the Ainsleys went camping frequently.

'Oh, well, have fun.' I tried to sound enthusiastic, but the words felt hollow, forced. I don't think I fooled him, though. A smile was playing around the edges of his lips, a knowing amusement, a silent understanding.

'Will you do something for me this weekend?' He turned to look me straight in the face, utilizing the full, devastating power of his burning gold eyes, holding me captive, demanding my attention.

I nodded helplessly, unable to resist, a silent, involuntary surrender.

'Don't be offended, but you seem to be one of those people who just attract accidents like

a magnet. So... try not to fall into the ocean or get run over or anything, all right?' He smiled crookedly, a flash of white teeth, a playful warning.

The helplessness had faded as he spoke, replaced by a surge of familiar irritation. I glared at him, my jaw tight, a defiant spark in my eyes.

'I'll see what I can do,' I snapped as I jumped out into the torrential rain. I slammed the door behind me with excessive force, the sound a defiant punctuation, an exclamation of my frustration.

He was still smiling as he drove away, a silver blur vanishing into the downpour,

leaving me standing alone, drenched and utterly, irrevocably bewildered.

Chapter Seven: Hounting Tiles

As I sat in my room, trying to concentrate on the third act of Macbeth, my ears strained, truly listening for the rumble of my truck. I would have thought, even over the relentless pounding rain, that I could have discerned the engine's familiar roar. But when I went to peek out the curtain – again, for the tenth time – it was simply there, a silent, dark shape in the driveway.

I wasn't looking forward to Friday, and it more than lived up to my non-expectations, a dull, predictable misery. Of course, there were the fainting comments, whispered and giggled.

Selene especially seemed to derive a perverse satisfaction from recounting that story, her eyes sparkling with amusement. Luckily, Kaelen had, for once, kept his mouth shut, and no one seemed to know about Eryndor's impossible involvement. Selene did, however, have a multitude of questions about lunch, her curiosity insatiable.

'So what did Eryndor Ainsley want yesterday?' Selene asked in Trig, her voice bright with anticipation.

'I don't know,' I answered truthfully, the words flat, devoid of emotion. 'He never really got to the point.'

'You looked kind of mad,' she fished, her gaze probing.

'Did I?' I kept my expression blank, a carefully constructed mask of indifference.

'You know, I've never seen him sit with anyone but his family before. That was weird.'

'Weird,' I agreed, a single, noncommittal word. She seemed annoyed; she flipped her dark curls impatiently – I guessed she'd been hoping to hear something that would make a good, juicy story for her to pass on, a morsel of gossip.

The worst part about Friday was that, even though I knew with a rational certainty he wasn't going to be there, a stubborn, irrational part of me still hoped. When I walked into the cafeteria with Selene and Kaelen, I couldn't keep my eyes from looking at his table, where

Aria, Lyra, and Thalen sat talking, their heads close together, a silent, exclusive huddle. And I couldn't stop the pervasive gloom that engulfed me, a cold, heavy blanket, as I realized I didn't know how long I would have to wait before I saw him again, before his presence illuminated my world.

At my usual table, everyone was buzzing with our plans for the next day, a collective excitement I couldn't quite share. Kaelen was animated again, his face alight with enthusiasm, placing a great deal of trust in the local weatherman who stubbornly promised sun tomorrow. I'd have to see that before I believed it, before I allowed myself any hope. But it was warmer today – almost sixty, a

shocking warmth for Rockville. Maybe the outing wouldn't be completely miserable.

I intercepted a few unfriendly glances from Lauren during lunch, which I didn't understand until we were all walking out of the room together. I was right behind her, just a foot from her slick, silver blond hair, and she was evidently unaware of my proximity, of my silent presence.

'...don't know why Ava Nattalie' – she sneered my name, a venomous hiss – 'doesn't just sit with the Ainsleys from now on.'

I heard her muttering to Kaelen. I'd never noticed what an unpleasant, nasal voice she had, and I was genuinely surprised by the raw malice in it. I really didn't know her well at all,

certainly not well enough for her to dislike me – or so I'd thought. 'She's my friend; she sits with us,' Kaelen whispered back loyally, a defensive, almost territorial note in his voice. I paused, letting Selene and Angela pass me, a sudden reluctance to hear any more of their unpleasant exchange.

That night at dinner, Marcellus seemed unusually enthusiastic about my trip to La Push in the morning. I think he felt a familiar, nagging guilt for leaving me home alone on the weekends, but he'd spent too many years building his solitary habits to break them now, to change his ingrained routine. Of course, he knew the names of all the kids going, and their parents, and their great-grandparents, too, probably, a testament to his deep roots in this

small town. He seemed to approve. I wondered if he would approve of my audacious plan to ride to Seattle with Eryndor Ainsley. Not that I was ever going to tell him.

'Dad, do you know a place called Goat Rocks or something like that? I think it's south of Mount Rainier,' I asked casually, trying to sound nonchalant.

'Yeah - why?' His brow furrowed, a hint of suspicion.

I shrugged, a dismissive gesture. 'Some kids were talking about camping there.'

'It's not a very good place for camping.' He sounded genuinely surprised, a note of disbelief in his voice. 'Too many bears. Most people go there during the hunting season.'

'Oh,' I murmured, a noncommittal sound.

'Maybe I got the name wrong.'

I meant to sleep in, to luxuriate in the rare warmth of my bed, but an unusual brightness woke me, a startling intrusion. I opened my eyes to see a clear, almost blinding yellow light streaming through my window. I couldn't believe it. I hurried to the window to check, and sure enough, there was the sun. It was in the wrong place in the sky, too low, a faint, distant orb, and it didn't seem to be as close as it should be, but it was definitely the sun, a rare, glorious sight.

Clouds ringed the horizon, a dark, ominous border, but a large patch of brilliant blue was visible in the middle, a defiant splash of color. I lingered by the window as long as I could,

afraid that if I left, the blue would disappear again, swallowed by the relentless gray.

The Newtons' Olympic Outfitters store was just north of town. I'd seen the store, its rustic facade familiar, but I'd never stopped there – not having much need for any supplies required for being outdoors over an extended period of time, for adventures I rarely undertook. In the parking lot, I recognized Kaelen's Suburban and Tyler's Sentra, their familiar shapes a small comfort. As I pulled up next to their vehicles, I could see the group standing around in front of the Suburban, a cluster of familiar faces. Zephyr was there, along with two other boys I had class with; I was fairly sure their names were Ben and Conner. Selene was there, flanked by Angela

and Lauren. Three other girls stood with them, including one I remembered falling over in Gym on Friday, a mortifying memory. That one gave me a dirty look as I got out of the truck, and whispered something to Lauren, a conspiratorial murmur. Lauren shook out her cornsilk hair, a shimmering cascade, and eyed me scornfully, a clear disdain in her gaze.

So it was going to be one of those days.

At least Kaelen was happy to see me, his face lighting up.

'You came!' he called, delighted, a wide, genuine smile. 'And I said it would be sunny today, didn't I?'

'I told you I was coming,' I reminded him, a faint smile touching my lips.

'We're just waiting for Lee and Samantha... unless you invited someone,' Kaelen added, his eyes darting to me, a hint of suspicion.

'Nope,' I lied lightly, the word slipping out effortlessly, hoping I wouldn't get caught in the lie. But also, a secret, desperate part of me wished that a miracle would occur, and Eryndor would appear, a dazzling, impossible vision.

Kaelen looked satisfied, his suspicion fading.

'Will you ride in my car? It's that or Lee's mom's minivan.'

'Sure.' The choice was obvious.

He smiled blissfully, a wide, genuine grin. It was so easy to make Kaelen happy, a simple, uncomplicated joy.

'You can have shotgun,' he promised, his voice triumphant. I hid my chagrin, a silent grimace. It wasn't as simple to make Kaelen and Selene happy at the same time, a delicate balancing act. I could see Selene glowering at us now, her eyes narrowed, a clear sign of her displeasure.

The numbers worked out in my favor, though, a stroke of unexpected luck. Lee brought two extra people, and suddenly every seat was necessary, every space filled. I managed to wedge Selene in between Kaelen and me in the front seat of the Suburban, a tight squeeze. Kaelen could have been more

graceful about it, but at least Selene seemed appeased, her scowl softening.

It was only fifteen miles to La Push from Rockville, a short, winding journey, with gorgeous, dense green forests edging the road most of the way, their ancient trees a silent, watchful presence, and the wide Quillayute River snaking beneath it twice, a silver ribbon through the landscape. I was glad I had the window seat, a small reprieve. We'd rolled the windows down – the Suburban was a bit claustrophobic with nine people crammed in it – and I tried to absorb as much sunlight as possible, to soak in its rare warmth.

I'd been to the beaches around La Push many times during my Rockville summers with Marcellus, so the mile-long crescent of First

Beach was familiar to me, a landscape etched in my memory. It was still breathtaking, a raw, untamed beauty. The water was dark gray, even in the sunlight, white-capped and heaving to the gray, rocky shore, a restless, churning expanse. Islands rose out of the steel harbor waters with sheer cliff sides, reaching to uneven summits, and crowned with austere, soaring firs, their dark silhouettes stark against the sky. The beach had only a thin border of actual sand at the water's edge, after which it grew into millions of large, smooth stones that looked uniformly gray from a distance, but close up were every shade a stone could be: terra-cotta, sea green, lavender, blue gray, dull gold, a vibrant tapestry of color. The tide line was strewn with huge driftwood trees, bleached bone white in

the salt waves, some piled together against the edge of the forest fringe, a silent testament to the ocean's power, some lying solitary, just out of reach of the waves, like sleeping giants.

There was a brisk wind coming off the waves, cool and briny, carrying the scent of salt and seaweed. Pelicans floated on the swells while seagulls and a lone eagle wheeled above them, their cries piercing the air. The clouds still circled the sky, a dark, ominous threat, promising to invade at any moment, but for now the sun shone bravely in its halo of blue sky, a defiant beacon.

We picked our way down to the beach, Kaelen leading the way to a ring of driftwood logs that had obviously been used for parties

like ours before, a makeshift gathering place. There was a fire circle already in place, filled with black ashes, a silent echo of past revelry. Zephyr and the boy I thought was named Ben gathered broken branches of driftwood from the drier piles against the forest edge, their movements quick and efficient, and soon had a teepee-shaped construction built atop the old cinders.

'Have you ever seen a driftwood fire?'

Kaelen asked me, his voice eager, seeking my approval. I was sitting on one of the bone-colored benches; the other girls clustered, gossiping excitedly, on either side of me, their voices a low hum. Kaelen kneeled by the fire, lighting one of the smaller sticks with a cigarette lighter, a tiny flame flickering.

'No,' I said as he placed the blazing twig carefully against the teepee, the dry wood catching.

'You'll like this then - watch the colors.' He lit another small branch and laid it alongside the first. The flames started to lick quickly up the dry wood, a hungry, dancing orange.

'It's blue,' I said in surprise, a genuine gasp.

'The salt does it. Pretty, isn't it?' He lit one more piece, placed it where the fire hadn't yet caught, and then came to sit by me.

Thankfully, Selene was on his other side, her presence a buffer. She turned to him and claimed his attention, her voice a low murmur. I watched the strange blue and green flames

crackle toward the sky, a mesmerizing,
otherworldly dance.

After a half hour of desultory chatter, some of the boys, restless, wanted to hike to the nearby tidal pools. It was a dilemma, a familiar internal conflict. On the one hand, I loved the tide pools. They had fascinated me since I was a child; they were one of the only things I ever looked forward to when I had to come to Rockville, a small, cherished joy. On the other hand, I'd also fallen into them a lot, a clumsy, inevitable occurrence. Not a big deal when you're seven and with your dad. It reminded me, with a sudden, sharp clarity, of Eryndor's request – that I not fall into the ocean.

Lauren was the one who, inadvertently, made my decision for me. She didn't want to hike, and she was definitely wearing the wrong shoes for it, her impractical footwear a clear deterrent. Most of the other girls besides Angela and Selene decided to stay on the beach as well, preferring the comfort of the fire. I waited until Tyler and Zephyr had committed to remaining with them before I got up quietly to join the pro-hiking group, a silent escape. Kaelen gave me a huge smile when he saw that I was coming, his face lighting up.

The hike wasn't too long, though I hated to lose the open sky in the oppressive confines of the woods. The green light of the forest was strangely at odds with the adolescent laughter, too murky and ominous to be in

harmony with the light banter around me, a discordant symphony. I had to watch each step I took very carefully, avoiding gnarled roots below and treacherous branches above, and I soon fell behind, my clumsiness asserting itself. Eventually, I broke through the emerald confines of the forest and found the rocky shore again. It was low tide, and a tidal river flowed past us on its way to the sea, a silver ribbon winding through the landscape. Along its pebbled banks, shallow pools that never completely drained were teeming with life, miniature ecosystems.

I was very cautious not to lean too far over the little ocean ponds, my balance precarious. The others were fearless, leaping over the rocks with carefree abandon, perching

precariously on the edges, their movements fluid and confident. I found a very stable-looking rock on the fringe of one of the largest pools and sat there cautiously, spellbound by the natural aquarium below me, its vibrant life a mesmerizing spectacle. The bouquets of brilliant anemones undulated ceaselessly in the invisible current, their delicate tentacles swaying, twisted shells scurried about the edges, obscuring the crabs within them, starfish stuck motionless to the rocks and each other, their five arms splayed, while one small black eel with white racing stripes wove through the bright green weeds, a silent hunter, waiting for the sea to return. I was completely absorbed, lost in the miniature world, except for one small, persistent part of my mind that wondered what Eryndor was

doing now, and tried to imagine what he would be saying if he were here with me, his presence a constant, unsettling hum.

Finally, the boys were hungry, their stomachs rumbling, and I got up stiffly to follow them back. I tried to keep up better this time through the woods, to avoid further humiliation, so naturally I fell a few times, my feet betraying me. I got some shallow scrapes on my palms, and the knees of my jeans were stained green with moss and dirt, but it could have been worse, much worse.

When we got back to First Beach, the group we'd left behind had multiplied. As we got closer, we could see the shining, straight black hair and copper skin of the newcomers, teenagers from the reservation, come to

socialize, their laughter echoing across the sand.

The food was already being passed around, the aroma of grilled meat filling the air, and the boys hurried to claim a share while Zephyr introduced us as we each entered the driftwood circle. Angela and I were the last to arrive, and, as Zephyr said our names, I noticed a younger boy sitting on the stones near the fire glance up at me in interest, his dark eyes curious. I sat down next to Angela, and Kaelen brought us sandwiches and an array of sodas to choose from, while a boy who looked to be the oldest of the visitors rattled off the names of the seven others with him. All I caught was that one of the girls was

also named Selene, and the boy who noticed me was named Nevaeh.

It was relaxing to sit with Angela; she was a restful kind of person to be around – she didn't feel the need to fill every silence with chatter, a rare and welcome trait. She left me free to think undisturbed while we ate, to process the day's events. And I was thinking about how disjointedly time seemed to flow in Rockville, passing in a blur at times, with single images standing out more clearly than others, etched in my memory. And then, at other times, every second was significant, etched in my mind with excruciating detail. I knew exactly what caused the difference, the catalyst for this strange perception, and it disturbed me deeply.

During lunch, the clouds started to advance, slinking across the blue sky, darting in front of the sun momentarily, casting long, shifting shadows across the beach, and blackening the waves, turning the ocean to a churning, ominous expanse. As they finished eating, people started to drift away in twos and threes, drawn by different desires. Some walked down to the edge of the waves, trying to skip rocks across the choppy surface, their laughter carried on the wind. Others were gathering a second expedition to the tide pools, eager for more exploration. Kaelen – with Selene shadowing him, a loyal companion – headed up to the one shop in the village, perhaps for more snacks. Some of the local kids went with them; others went along on the hike. By the time they all had scattered, I was

sitting alone on my driftwood log, with Lauren and Tyler occupying themselves by the CD player someone had thought to bring, their music a faint, tinny sound, and three teenagers from the reservation perched around the circle, including the boy named Nevaeh and the tall, oldest boy who had acted as spokesperson.

A few minutes after Angela left with the hikers, Nevaeh sauntered over to take her place by my side, his movements fluid and confident. He looked fourteen, maybe fifteen, and had long, glossy black hair pulled back with a rubber band at the nape of his neck, framing a striking face. His skin was beautiful, silky and russet-colored, a warm, earthy tone; his eyes were dark, set deep above the high

planes of his cheekbones, intelligent and observant. He still had just a hint of childish roundness left around his chin, a lingering softness. Altogether, a very pretty face.

However, my positive opinion of his looks was somewhat damaged by the first words out of his mouth.

'You're Nattalie Amsel, aren't you?'

It was like the first day of school all over again, the familiar, unwelcome question.

'Ava Nattalie,' I sighed, a weary resignation in my voice.

'I'm Nevaeh Black.' He held his hand out in a friendly gesture, his smile warm and open.

'You bought my dad's truck.'

'Oh,' I said, relieved, a genuine smile breaking through my earlier irritation, shaking his sleek hand. 'You're Billy's son. I probably should remember you.'

'No, I'm the youngest of the family - you would remember my older sisters.'

'Rachel and Rebecca,' I suddenly recalled, the names surfacing from a distant memory. Marcellus and Billy had thrown us together a lot during my visits, desperate to keep us busy while they fished. We were all too shy to make much progress as friends, awkward children forced into proximity. Of course, I'd kicked up enough tantrums to end the fishing trips by the time I was eleven, my patience for forced socializing having worn thin.

'Are they here?' I examined the girls at the ocean's edge, wondering if I would recognize them now, if time had changed them as much as it had me.

'No.' Nevaeh shook his head, a faint sadness in his eyes. 'Rachel got a scholarship to Washington State, and Rebecca married a Samoan surfer – she lives in Hawaii now.'

'Married. Wow.' I was stunned, a genuine surprise. The twins were only a little over a year older than I was, yet their lives seemed so much further along.

'So how do you like the truck?' he asked, a shift in topic.

'I love it. It runs great.'

'Yeah, but it's really slow,' he laughed, a deep, husky sound. 'I was so relieved when Marcellus bought it. My dad wouldn't let me work on building another car when we had a perfectly good vehicle right there.'

'It's not that slow,' I objected, a defensive note in my voice.

'Have you tried to go over sixty?'

'No,' I admitted, a faint flush rising to my cheeks.

'Good. Don't.' He grinned, a playful warning.

I couldn't help grinning back, a genuine smile. 'It does great in a collision,' I offered in

my truck's defense, a wry acknowledgment of its recent ordeal.

'I don't think a tank could take out that old monster,' he agreed with another laugh, a shared understanding.

'So you build cars?' I asked, impressed, my interest piqued.

'When I have free time, and parts. You wouldn't happen to know where I could get my hands on a master cylinder for a 1986 Volkswagen Rabbit?' he added jokingly, his eyes twinkling. He had a pleasant, husky voice, a warm, inviting tone.

'Sorry,' I laughed, 'I haven't seen any lately, but I'll keep my eyes open for you.' As if I knew what that was, as if I had any idea what

a master cylinder even looked like. He was very easy to talk with, a refreshing change.

He flashed a brilliant smile, looking at me appreciatively in a way I was learning to recognize, a subtle shift in his gaze. I wasn't the only one who noticed.

'You know Ava Nattalie, Nevaeh?' Lauren asked - in what I imagined was an insolent tone, a thinly veiled challenge - from across the fire, her voice sharp.

'We've sort of known each other since I was born,' he laughed, smiling at me again, a warm, easy camaraderie.

'How nice.' She didn't sound like she thought it was nice at all, and her pale, fishy eyes narrowed, a clear sign of her displeasure.

'Ava Nattalie,' she called again, watching my face carefully, her gaze scrutinizing, 'I was just saying to Tyler that it was too bad none of the Ainsleys could come out today. Didn't anyone think to invite them?' Her expression of concern was utterly unconvincing, a transparent attempt at malice.

'You mean Dr. Carlisle Ainsley's family?' the tall, older boy asked before I could respond, much to Lauren's obvious irritation. He was really closer to a man than a boy, and his voice was very deep, a resonant baritone.

'Yes, do you know them?' she asked condescendingly, turning halfway toward him, her tone dripping with superiority.

'The Ainsleys don't come here,' he said in a tone that unequivocally closed the subject, ignoring her question, his gaze firm.

Tyler, trying desperately to win back her attention, asked Lauren's opinion on a CD he held, a pathetic attempt to regain her favor. She was distracted, her attention already elsewhere.

I stared at the deep-voiced boy, taken aback by his bluntness, but he was looking away toward the dark forest behind us, his gaze distant. He'd said that the Ainsleys didn't come here, but his tone had implied something more – that they weren't allowed; they were prohibited. His manner left a strange, unsettling impression on me, and I tried to

ignore it without success, the words echoing in my mind.

Nevaeh interrupted my meditation, his voice pulling me back to the present. 'So is Rockville driving you insane yet?'

'Oh, I'd say that's an understatement.' I grimaced, a genuine expression of my frustration. He grinned understandingly, a shared amusement.

I was still turning over the brief, enigmatic comment on the Ainsleys, and I had a sudden inspiration, a desperate, impulsive idea. It was a stupid plan, I knew, but I didn't have any better ideas, any other avenues to explore. I hoped that young Nevaeh was as yet inexperienced around girls, so that he

wouldn't see through my sure-to-be-pitiful attempts at flirting, my clumsy efforts at manipulation.

'Do you want to walk down the beach with me?' I asked, trying to imitate that way Eryndor had of looking up from underneath his eyelashes, a subtle, alluring glance. It couldn't have nearly the same effect, I was sure, but Nevaeh jumped up willingly enough, his face alight with eagerness.

As we walked north across the multihued stones toward the driftwood seawall, the clouds finally closed ranks across the sky, a dark, oppressive blanket, causing the sea to darken, its waves turning a deep, ominous gray, and the temperature to drop, a sudden,

chilling bite. I shoved my hands deep into the pockets of my jacket, seeking warmth.

'So you're, what, sixteen?' I asked, trying not to look like an idiot as I fluttered my eyelids the way I'd seen girls do on TV, a clumsy, forced coquetry.

'I just turned fifteen,' he confessed, flattered, a faint blush on his cheeks.

'Really?' My face was full of false surprise, a feigned astonishment. 'I would have thought you were older.'

'I'm tall for my age,' he explained, a simple, straightforward answer.

'Do you come up to Rockville much?' I asked archly, as if I was hoping for a

resounding yes, for frequent visits. I sounded idiotic to myself, my voice a forced, unnatural tone. I was afraid he would turn on me with disgust and accuse me of my fraud, of my transparent manipulation, but he still seemed flattered, his smile unwavering.

'Not too much,' he admitted with a frown, a hint of disappointment. 'But when I get my car finished I can go up as much as I want - after I get my license,' he amended, a hopeful glimmer in his eyes.

'Who was that other boy Lauren was talking to? He seemed a little old to be hanging out with us.' I purposefully lumped myself in with the youngsters, trying to make it clear that I preferred Nevaeh's company, that I was on his side.

'That's Sam – he's nineteen,' he informed me, his voice casual.

'What was that he was saying about the doctor's family?' I asked innocently, my voice carefully neutral, a feigned ignorance.

'The Ainsleys? Oh, they're not supposed to come onto the reservation.' He looked away, out toward Nevaeh Island, his gaze distant, as he confirmed what I'd thought I'd heard in Sam's voice, the unspoken implication now explicit.

'Why not?' I pressed, my curiosity overriding my caution.

He glanced back at me, biting his lip, a sign of hesitation. 'Oops. I'm not supposed to say anything about that.'

'Oh, I won't tell anyone, I'm just curious.' I tried to make my smile alluring, a desperate attempt at charm, wondering if I was laying it on too thick, if my efforts were transparent.

He smiled back, though, looking genuinely allured, his eyes softening. Then he lifted one eyebrow, a subtle, knowing gesture, and his voice was even huskier than before, a deep, resonant rumble.

'Do you like scary stories?' he asked ominously, a hint of theatricality in his tone.

'I love them,' I enthused, making an effort to smolder at him, a clumsy attempt at flirtation.

Nevaeh strolled to a nearby driftwood tree that had its roots sticking out like the

attenuated legs of a huge, pale spider, its gnarled form a natural throne. He perched lightly on one of the twisted roots while I sat beneath him on the body of the tree, a respectful audience. He stared down at the rocks, a smile hovering around the edges of his broad lips. I could see he was going to try to make this good, to deliver a memorable performance. I focused on keeping the vital interest I felt, the desperate need for answers, out of my eyes, to maintain a facade of casual curiosity.

'Do you know any of our old stories, about where we came from – the Quileutes, I mean?' he began, his voice dropping, taking on a storytelling cadence.

'Not really,' I admitted, shaking my head.

'Well, there are lots of legends, some of them claiming to date back to the Flood – supposedly, the ancient Quileutes tied their canoes to the tops of the tallest trees on the mountain to survive like Noah and the ark.' He smiled, to show me how little stock he put in the histories, a hint of modern skepticism. 'Another legend claims that we descended from wolves – and that the wolves are our brothers still. It's against tribal law to kill them.

'Then there are the stories about the cold ones.' His voice dropped a little lower, a subtle shift in tone, a hint of gravity.

'The cold ones?' I asked, not faking my intrigue now, my voice genuinely breathless.

'Yes. There are stories of the cold ones as old as the wolf legends, and some much more recent. According to legend, my own great-grandfather knew some of them. He was the one who made the treaty that kept them off our land.' He rolled his eyes, a familiar teenage gesture of disbelief, but the underlying seriousness was palpable.

'Your great-grandfather?' I encouraged, leaning forward slightly.

'He was a tribal elder, like my father. You see, the cold ones are the natural enemies of the wolf-well, not the wolf, really, but the wolves that turn into men, like our ancestors. You would call them werewolves.'

'Werewolves have enemies?' I asked, the absurdity of the concept almost making me laugh, but the intensity of his gaze held me.

'Only one.'

I stared at him earnestly, hoping to disguise my impatience, my desperate need for answers, as admiration, a silent plea for him to continue.

'So you see,' Nevaeh continued, his voice gaining momentum, 'the cold ones are traditionally our enemies. But this pack that came to our territory during my great-grandfather's time was different. They didn't hunt the way others of their kind did – they weren't supposed to be dangerous to the tribe. So my great-grandfather made a truce with

them. If they would promise to stay off our lands, we wouldn't expose them to the pale-faces.' He winked at me, a conspiratorial gesture.

'If they weren't dangerous, then why... ?' I tried to understand, struggling not to let him see how seriously I was considering his ghost story, how deeply his words resonated.

'There's always a risk for humans to be around the cold ones, even if they're civilized like this clan was. You never know when they might get too hungry to resist.' He deliberately worked a thick edge of menace into his tone, a low, guttural growl.

'What do you mean, 'civilized'?' I asked, my voice barely a whisper.

'They claimed that they didn't hunt humans. They supposedly were somehow able to prey on animals instead.'

I tried to keep my voice casual, to mask the sudden, frantic pounding of my heart. 'So how does it fit in with the Ainsleys? Are they like the cold ones your great-grandfather met?'

'No.' He paused dramatically, letting the suspense build, his dark eyes fixed on mine. 'They are the same ones.'

He must have thought the expression on my face was fear inspired by his story. He smiled, pleased, a triumphant gleam in his eyes, and continued, savoring the moment.

'There are more of them now, a new female and a new male, but the rest are the same. In my great-grandfather's time they already knew of the leader, Carlisle. He'd been here and gone before your people had even arrived.' He was fighting a smile, a mischievous glint in his eyes.

'And what are they?' I finally asked, the words a desperate, almost pleading whisper. 'What are the cold ones?'

He smiled darkly, a chilling, knowing curve of his lips.

'Blood drinkers,' he replied in a chilling voice, a low, resonant pronouncement. 'Your people call them vampires.'

I stared out at the rough surf after he answered, my gaze fixed on the churning waves, not sure what my face was exposing, what emotions were betraying me.

'You have goose bumps,' he laughed delightedly, a triumphant sound.

'You're a good storyteller,' I complimented him, still staring into the waves, unable to tear my gaze away.

'Pretty crazy stuff, though, isn't it? No wonder my dad doesn't want us to talk about it to anyone.'

I couldn't control my expression enough to look at him yet, my mind reeling, trying to process the impossible. 'Don't worry, I won't give you away.'

'I guess I just violated the treaty,' he laughed, a light, carefree sound.

'I'll take it to the grave,' I promised, my voice barely a whisper, and then I shivered, a deep, involuntary tremor.

'Seriously, though, don't say anything to Marcellus. He was pretty mad at my dad when he heard that some of us weren't going to the hospital since Dr. Carlisle Ainsley started working there.'

'I won't, of course not.' The words were automatic, a reflex.

'So do you think we're a bunch of superstitious natives or what?' he asked in a playful tone, but with a hint of worry, a subtle insecurity. I still hadn't looked away from the

ocean, its vastness a reflection of my own overwhelming thoughts.

I turned and smiled at him as normally as I could, a forced, brittle smile.

'No. I think you're very good at telling scary stories, though. I still have goose bumps, see?' I held up my arm, displaying the evidence.

'Cool.' He smiled, a genuine, easy grin.

And then the sound of the beach rocks clattering against each other, a sudden, sharp warning, alerted us that someone was approaching. Our heads snapped up at the same time to see Kaelen and Selene about fifty yards away, walking toward us, their figures growing larger.

'There you are, Ava Nattalie,' Kaelen called in relief, waving his arm over his head, a wide, almost frantic gesture.

'Is that your boyfriend?' Nevaeh asked, alerted by the jealous edge in Kaelen's voice. I was surprised it was so obvious, so transparent.

'No, definitely not,' I whispered, my voice firm, decisive. I was tremendously grateful to Nevaeh, and eager to make him as happy as possible, to repay his kindness. I winked at him, carefully turning away from Kaelen to do so, a subtle, conspiratorial gesture. He smiled, elated by my inept flirting, his face alight with triumph.

'So when I get my license...' he began, a hopeful note in his voice.

'You should come see me in Rockville. We could hang out sometime.' I felt a pang of guilt as I said this, knowing that I'd used him, that my flirtation had a hidden motive. But I really did like Nevaeh. He was someone I could easily be friends with, a genuine, uncomplicated connection.

Kaelen had reached us now, with Selene still a few paces back, her gaze fixed on us. I could see his eyes appraising Nevaeh, a quick, assessing glance, and looking satisfied at his obvious youth, a smug relief.

'Where have you been?' he asked, though the answer was right in front of him, a clear accusation in his voice.

'Nevaeh was just telling me some local stories,' I volunteered, my voice light, deflecting. 'It was really interesting.'

I smiled at Nevaeh warmly, and he grinned back, a shared secret.

'Well,' Kaelen paused, carefully reassessing the situation as he watched our camaraderie, a subtle shift in his demeanor. 'We're packing up – it looks like it's going to rain soon.'

We all looked up at the glowering sky. It certainly did look like rain, a dark, ominous threat.

'Okay.' I jumped up. 'I'm coming.'

'It was nice to see you again,' Nevaeh said, and I could tell he was taunting Kaelen just a bit, a playful jab.

'It really was. Next time Marcellus comes down to see Billy, I'll come, too,' I promised, a genuine offer.

His grin stretched across his face, wide and bright. 'That would be cool.'

'And thanks,' I added earnestly, a sincere note of gratitude.

I pulled up my hood as we tramped across the rocks toward the parking lot. A few drops were beginning to fall, making black spots on the stones where they landed, a silent promise

of more rain to come. When we got to the Suburban, the others were already loading everything back in, their movements hurried. I crawled into the backseat by Angela and Tyler, announcing that I'd already had my turn in the shotgun position, a deliberate concession.

Angela just stared out the window at the escalating storm, her face pensive, and Lauren twisted around in the middle seat to occupy Tyler's attention, her voice a low murmur, so I could simply lay my head back on the seat and close my eyes and try very hard not to think, to escape the swirling chaos of my mind.

Chapter Eight: Journey to the City

I laid my head back against the Suburban's seat, closing my eyes, and tried very hard not to think. But the words, Nevaeh's words,

echoed in the confines of my mind, a chilling, persistent whisper: 'Blood drinkers... Your people call them vampires.'

The world outside, blurred by the rain and the accelerating vehicle, seemed to mock my attempts at oblivion. Vampires. The word, once relegated to the realm of fiction and childish nightmares, now felt terrifyingly real, a cold, sharp edge in the fabric of my reality. Every impossible event, every unsettling detail about Eryndor Ainsley, clicked into place with a horrifying, undeniable precision. His unnatural speed, his superhuman strength, the shifting color of his eyes, the coldness of his skin, his aversion to food, his family's aloofness, their strange, almost predatory

grace. It all fit. It all made a terrifying, undeniable sense.

And I had invited one of them to take me to Seattle. I had agreed to spend hours alone in a car with a vampire. My stomach, already queasy from the blood typing incident, churned with a fresh wave of nausea, a mix of fear and a strange, almost perverse excitement. What had I done? What was I doing?

The drive back to Rockville from La Push was a blur of internal turmoil. Tyler and Lauren's chatter in the front seat, Kaelen's occasional glances in the rearview mirror, Angela's quiet presence beside me - it all faded into a dull background hum. My mind was consumed by Eryndor, by Nevaeh's story,

by the chilling implications. Was Eryndor truly one of them? And if so, why had he saved me? Why was he bothering with me at all? The questions swirled, a chaotic vortex, leaving me feeling more bewildered and terrified than ever.

When Marcellus came home that evening, the familiar scent of his aftershave and the comforting creak of his boots were a welcome anchor in my disoriented world. I managed to feign a casual enthusiasm about the beach trip, recounting the driftwood fire and the tide pools, carefully omitting Nevaeh's 'scary stories.' The thought of telling Marcellus about Quileute legends of 'cold ones' and 'werewolves' felt like a betrayal of Nevaeh's trust, and besides, Marcellus would

undoubtedly dismiss it as teenage fantasy,
another sign of my growing eccentricity.

That night, sleep was a restless,
fragmented thing. The dreams were no longer
vague shadows of Eryndor walking away. Now,
they were vivid, terrifying tableaux: his golden
eyes blazing, his hands leaving dents in metal,
the chilling whisper of 'blood drinkers.' I
would wake with a gasp, my heart hammering,
the phantom chill of his touch still on my skin.

The week that followed was a strange
blend of heightened awareness and forced
normalcy. Every interaction with Eryndor in
Biology class became a tightrope walk. His
eyes, I noticed with a morbid fascination, were
indeed growing darker day by day, a
deepening ocher that hinted at the black I had

seen before. He still maintained his distance, his chair angled away, his movements precise and controlled, but the air between us crackled with an unspoken tension, a dangerous current. I found myself hyper-aware of his every subtle shift, every minute gesture.

He didn't speak to me directly in class, maintaining the facade of indifference, but his presence was a constant, almost physical, weight. I would catch him sometimes, a fleeting glance, his golden eyes fixed on me with that familiar, unnerving intensity, a look that seemed to strip away my defenses, to see straight into my churning thoughts. And each time, I would quickly avert my gaze, my

cheeks flushing, a strange mix of fear and a forbidden thrill coursing through me.

The thought of the Seattle trip, once a distant, abstract idea, now loomed large, a terrifying, exhilarating reality. I had agreed. I had nodded. There was no backing out. My mind raced, trying to formulate excuses, escape routes, anything to avoid spending hours alone with a creature who, according to Nevaeh, drank blood. But another part of me, a dark, curious, reckless part, yearned for the confrontation, for the answers, for the danger.

Friday arrived, shrouded in its usual Rockville mist. My truck, returned by Lyra the previous afternoon, sat in the driveway, its familiar bulk a small comfort. I packed a small bag for Seattle, a few books, a change of

clothes, trying to appear nonchalant to Marcellus. He was still pleased about my supposed book-hunting mission, oblivious to the true nature of my impending journey.

The morning dragged, each minute an eternity. My classes were a blur. I picked at my lunch, the food tasteless in my mouth, my gaze constantly, nervously, darting towards the Ainsley table. Eryndor was there, his eyes now a deep, almost liquid black, a stark contrast to his pale skin. He looked... hungry. The thought sent a fresh wave of terror through me, but also, inexplicably, a strange pull.

As the final bell shrieked, signaling the end of the school day, my heart hammered against my ribs, a frantic drumbeat. This was

it. The moment of truth. I walked out of the school building, my steps hesitant, my eyes scanning the parking lot. His silver Volvo was there, gleaming, a silent, predatory beast. Eryndor was leaning against the driver's side door, his arms crossed, his gaze fixed on the school entrance. He saw me, and a faint, almost imperceptible smile touched his lips, a knowing curve.

I approached his car, each step feeling heavy, momentous. The air around him seemed to hum with a strange energy, a palpable tension. He straightened as I drew near, his golden eyes, now undeniably black, boring into mine.

'Ready, Ava Nattalie?' His voice was a low, musical murmur, the sound both captivating and terrifying.

I swallowed, my throat dry. 'Ready as I'll ever be,' I whispered, my voice barely audible.

He opened the passenger door, a silent invitation. I slid inside, the plush leather of the seat surprisingly soft beneath me. The interior smelled faintly of something clean, metallic, and something else... something subtly sweet, like old paper and rain. He closed the door with a soft click, and the world outside, the familiar, mundane world of Rockville High School, seemed to recede, replaced by the hushed, intimate confines of his car.

He got in the driver's side, his movements fluid and silent. The engine purred to life, a low, powerful rumble that vibrated through the floorboards. He glanced at me, a quick, assessing look, and then, without a word, he pulled out of the parking lot, the Volvo gliding effortlessly through the light rain that had begun to fall.

The silence in the car was thick, heavy with unspoken questions. I stared out the window, watching the familiar landscape of Rockville blur past, the dark trees and rain-slicked roads a monochrome painting. My mind raced, trying to reconcile the boy beside me with Nevaeh's chilling tale. Was he truly a 'cold one'? A vampire? The thought was

absurd, fantastical, yet every fiber of my being screamed that it was true.

'You're quiet,' Eryndor observed, his voice cutting through my thoughts, startling me.

'Just thinking,' I mumbled, my gaze still fixed on the passing scenery.

'About what?' His voice was soft, curious, yet with an underlying intensity that demanded an answer.

I hesitated, my heart hammering. This was my chance. My chance to confront him, to demand the truth. But the words caught in my throat, choked by a sudden, overwhelming fear. What if Nevaeh was right? What if he was dangerous?

'About... the weather,' I lied, the words feeling clumsy, inadequate.

He chuckled, a low, amused sound that held no genuine humor. 'The weather. Of course.' There was a hint of derision in his tone, a clear indication that he saw through my flimsy excuse.

The drive continued in silence, the unspoken questions hanging heavy in the air between us. The rain intensified, drumming against the windshield, blurring the world outside into a watery haze. I stole a glance at him. His profile was breathtaking, carved from marble, his eyes fixed on the road ahead, their black depths reflecting the passing trees. He looked utterly serene, utterly in control, utterly inhuman.

A sudden, sharp fear pierced through me. I was alone with him. Miles from Rockville. In a car that moved with impossible speed. What if he truly was the 'bad guy'? What if Nevaeh's story was not just a legend, but a terrifying reality?

My hands, clasped tightly in my lap, began to tremble. I took a deep, shaky breath, trying to calm my racing heart. This was it. The journey had begun. And I had no idea where it would lead.

The miles dissolved beneath the Volvo's silent wheels, the landscape shifting from the dense, oppressive green of Rockville to something more open, more expansive. The rain, a constant companion, softened to a fine mist, then lifted entirely, leaving the world

outside gleaming with a fresh, washed clarity. The highway stretched before us, a dark ribbon unspooling into the distance, and the car, impossibly fast, seemed to devour the road. I gripped my hands tighter, my knuckles white, the speed a dizzying, exhilarating rush that both terrified and thrilled me.

Eryndor drove with an almost unnerving precision, his movements economical, his gaze unwavering. He seemed to anticipate every curve, every slight shift in the road, as if the car were an extension of his own will. There was no hesitation, no wasted motion. He was a creature of perfect control, and the realization only deepened the chasm of my understanding.

'You like the speed,' he observed, his voice a low, knowing murmur, not a question. He hadn't looked at me, yet he knew.

I swallowed, my throat still dry. 'It's... different from my truck.' An understatement of epic proportions.

He chuckled, a genuine sound this time, a soft, melodic rumble that vibrated through the seat. 'Indeed.'

The silence returned, but it was different now. Less heavy, more expectant. My mind, despite my best efforts, continued its frantic dance of speculation. Vampire. The word still felt alien, yet it explained so much. I risked another glance at him. His profile was still breathtaking, but now, in the clearer light, I

noticed the subtle, almost imperceptible shift in the shadows beneath his eyes, the way his skin seemed to absorb the light rather than reflect it. He was a study in impossible perfection, a living sculpture.

'Do you have any questions, Ava Nattalie?' His voice was soft, almost gentle, yet it held an undeniable edge of challenge. He knew what I was thinking. He always seemed to know.

My heart hammered against my ribs, a frantic drum. This was it. The moment of reckoning. The chance to tear down the veil of mystery. But the words still caught, tangled in a knot of fear and a strange, almost paralyzing fascination. What if the truth was more terrifying than I could imagine? What if, in knowing, I irrevocably changed everything?

'Why... why did you offer me a ride?' I finally managed, the question mundane, almost pathetic, given the enormity of what I suspected.

He paused, a subtle tension in his jaw. 'I told you. I was tired of trying to stay away.' His voice was low, almost a confession. 'And I didn't think your truck would make it.'

'You could have just said that,' I retorted, a flicker of my usual defiance.

'Perhaps. But it wouldn't have been entirely true.' He glanced at me, a quick, piercing look, and in his black eyes, I saw a fleeting glimpse of something ancient, something profoundly weary, something that transcended human experience. It was like

looking into a deep, dark well, and for a terrifying instant, I felt a pull, a dizzying sense of falling.

A shiver traced its way down my spine, unrelated to the temperature. The air in the car, despite the heater, felt suddenly colder, thinner. This wasn't just about a boy and a girl. This was about something vast, something beyond my comprehension. A thread of destiny, perhaps, stretching across realities, echoing other worlds. I thought of the whispers of the Nevaeh Saga, the tales of ancient beings and interwoven fates, a faint, almost imperceptible resonance in the back of my mind, a feeling of connection to something larger, something cosmic. It was a fleeting thought, a whisper of possibility that vanished

as quickly as it came, leaving only a lingering sense of awe and dread.

The city lights of Seattle began to appear on the horizon, a distant, shimmering haze against the darkening sky. The journey, both physical and existential, was far from over. I was moving closer to answers, but with each mile, the questions grew larger, more terrifying, more impossible to ignore.

Chapter Nine: Unseen Current

I told Marcellus I had a lot of homework to do, and that I didn't want anything to eat. There was a basketball game on that he was excited about, though of course I had no idea what was special about it, the nuances of the sport lost on me, so he wasn't aware of

anything unusual in my face or tone. My carefully constructed mask of normalcy remained intact.

Once in my room, I locked the door, the click of the latch a small, defiant act. I dug through my desk until I found my old wireless earbuds, their charging case a familiar weight in my palm. I connected them to my phone. I opened a playlist Caleb had curated for me, a collection of his current obsessions. It was one of his favorite bands, a cacophony of guitars and drums, but they used a little too much bass and shrieking for my tastes, a jarring assault on my ears. I tapped play and lay down on my bed. I put in the earbuds, hit Play, and turned up the volume until it hurt my ears, the sound a physical pressure. I closed my eyes,

but the light still intruded, a faint glow through my eyelids, so I added a pillow over the top half of my face, creating a cocoon of darkness and noise.

I concentrated very carefully on the music, trying to understand the lyrics, to unravel the complicated, chaotic drum patterns, to find some order in the din. By the third time I'd listened through the album, I knew all the words to the choruses, at least, their repetitive refrains etched into my memory. I was surprised to find that I really did like the band after all, once I got past the initial blaring noise. I'd have to thank Caleb again, a small, unexpected gratitude.

And it worked. The shattering beats made it impossible for me to think – which was the

whole purpose of the exercise, the desperate attempt at mental obliteration. I listened to the album again and again, until I was singing along with all the songs, until, finally, mercifully, I fell asleep, the music a fading echo in my dreams.

I opened my eyes to a familiar place, yet one subtly altered. Aware in some corner of my consciousness that I was dreaming, I recognized the green light of the forest, dappled and ethereal. I could hear the waves crashing against the rocks somewhere nearby, a rhythmic, hypnotic roar. And I knew that if I found the ocean, I'd be able to see the sun, a beacon of impossible light. I was trying to follow the sound, to find the source of the crashing waves, but then Nevaeh Black was

there, his hand tugging on mine, pulling me back toward the blackest, most impenetrable part of the forest, away from the light.

'Nevaeh? What's wrong?' I asked, my voice laced with confusion, with a rising fear. His face was contorted with terror as he yanked with all his strength against my resistance; I didn't want to go into the suffocating dark, away from the promise of the sun.

'Run, Nevaeh, you have to run!' he whispered, his voice raw with terror, a desperate plea.

'This way, Nevaeh!' I recognized Kaelen's voice calling out of the gloomy heart of the trees, but I couldn't see him, only hear the disembodied sound.

'Why?' I asked, still pulling against Nevaeh's grasp, desperate now to find the sun, to escape the encroaching darkness.

But Nevaeh let go of my hand and yelped, a sharp, pained cry, suddenly shaking, falling to the dim forest floor. He twitched on the ground as I watched in horror, paralyzed by the sudden, brutal transformation.

'Nevaeh!' I screamed, my voice tearing through the dream. But he was gone. In his place was a large red-brown wolf with black eyes, its fur bristling. The wolf faced away from me, pointing toward the shore, the hair on the back of his shoulders bristling, low growls issuing from between his exposed fangs, a primal warning.

'Nevaeh, run!' Kaelen cried out again from behind me. But I didn't turn. My gaze was fixed on a light coming toward me from the beach, a mesmerizing, dangerous glow.

And then Eryndor Ainsley stepped out from the trees, his skin faintly glowing, his eyes black and dangerous, a predatory gleam. He held up one hand and beckoned me to come to him, a silent, irresistible invitation. The wolf growled, a deep, guttural sound, at my feet.

I took a step forward, drawn by an invisible thread, toward Eryndor. He smiled then, and his teeth were sharp, pointed, a terrifying, beautiful revelation.

'Trust me,' he purred, the word a silken caress, a chilling promise.

I took another step, compelled, unable to resist.

The wolf launched himself across the space between me and the vampire, a blur of red-brown fur, fangs aiming for the jugular, a desperate, valiant attack.

'No!' I screamed, wrenching upright out of my bed, the dream shattering around me.

My sudden movement caused the earbuds to pull my phone my phoneyer off the bedside table, and it clattered to the wooden floor, a jarring sound in the quiet room.

My light was still on, a harsh, yellow glow, and I was sitting fully dressed on the bed, with my shoes on, disoriented. I glanced, disoriented, at the clock on my dresser. It was five-thirty in the morning.

I groaned, a sound of profound weariness, fell back, and rolled over onto my face, kicking off my boots. I was too uncomfortable to get anywhere near sleep, though. I rolled back over and unbuttoned my jeans, yanking them off awkwardly as I tried to stay horizontal, my body protesting. I could feel the braid in my hair, an uncomfortable ridge along the back of my skull. I turned onto my side and ripped the rubber band out, quickly combing through the plaits with my fingers, releasing the tension. I

pulled the pillow back over my eyes, seeking oblivion.

It was all no use, of course. My subconscious had dredged up exactly the images I'd been trying so desperately to avoid, the fears I had tried to bury. I was going to have to face them now.

I sat up, and my head spun for a minute as the blood flowed downward, a dizzying sensation. First things first, I thought to myself, happy to put it off as long as possible. I grabbed my bathroom bag, a small comfort.

The shower didn't last nearly as long as I hoped it would, though. Even taking the time to blow-dry my hair, a tedious process, I was soon out of things to do in the bathroom.

Wrapped in a towel, I crossed back to my room. I couldn't tell if Marcellus was still asleep, or if he had already left. I went to look out my window, and the cruiser was gone. Fishing again.

I dressed slowly in my most comfy sweats and then made my bed – something I never did, a small act of defiance against the chaos of my thoughts. I couldn't put it off any longer. I went to my desk and switched on my old computer, its fan whirring to life.

I hated using the Internet here. My modem was sadly outdated, its connection agonizingly slow, my free service substandard; just dialing up took so long that I decided to go get myself a bowl of cereal while I waited, a small reprieve.

I ate slowly, chewing each bite with care, savoring the mundane act. When I was done, I washed the bowl and spoon, dried them, and put them away, a methodical ritual. My feet dragged as I climbed the stairs, each step heavy. I went to my CD player first, picking it up off the floor and placing it precisely in the center of the table. I pulled out the headphones, and put them away in the desk drawer, a silent promise to myself. Then I turned the same CD on, turning it down to the point where it was background noise, a faint, rhythmic hum.

With another sigh, I turned to my computer. Naturally, the screen was covered in pop-up ads, a digital assault. I sat in my hard folding chair and began closing all the

little windows, one by one, a tedious task.

Eventually, I made it to my favorite search engine. I shot down a few more pop-ups, their intrusive presence annoying, and then typed in one word.

Vampire.

It took an infuriatingly long time, of course. When the results came up, there was a lot to sift through – everything from movies and TV shows to role-playing games, underground metal, and gothic cosmetic companies.

Then I found a promising site – Vampires A-Z. I waited impatiently for it to load, quickly clicking closed each ad that flashed across the screen, a relentless barrage. Finally, the

screen was finished – simple white background with black text, academic-looking, a stark contrast to the chaotic pop-ups. Two quotes greeted me on the home page:

Throughout the vast shadowy world of ghosts and demons there is no figure so terrible, no figure so dreaded and abhorred, yet dight with such fearful fascination, as the vampire, who is himself neither ghost nor demon, but yet who partakes the dark natures and possesses the mysterious and terrible qualities of both. - Rev.

Montague Summers

If there is in this world a well-attested account, it is that of the

vampires. Nothing is lacking:
official reports, affidavits of well-
known people, of surgeons, of
priests, of magistrates; the judicial
proof is most complete. And with
all that, who is there who believes
in vampires? - Rousseau

The rest of the site was an alphabetized
listing of all the different myths of vampires
held throughout the world. The first I clicked
on, the Danag, was a Filipino vampire
supposedly responsible for planting taro on
the islands long ago. The myth continued that
the Danag worked with humans for many
years, but the partnership ended one day
when a woman cut her finger and a Danag

sucked her wound, enjoying the taste so much that it drained her body completely of blood.

I read carefully through the descriptions, looking for anything that sounded familiar, let alone plausible, anything that resonated with Eryndor. It seemed that most vampire myths centered around beautiful women as demons and children as victims; they also seemed like constructs created to explain away the high mortality rates for young children, and to give men an excuse for infidelity. Many of the stories involved bodiless spirits and warnings against improper burials. There wasn't much that sounded like the movies I'd seen, and only a very few, like the Hebrew Estrie and the Polish Upier, who were even preoccupied with drinking blood.

Only three entries really caught my attention: the Romanian Varacolaci, a powerful undead being who could appear as a beautiful, pale-skinned human, the Slovak Nelapsi, a creature so strong and fast it could massacre an entire village in the single hour after midnight, and one other, the Stregoni benefici.

About this last there was only one brief sentence.

Stregoni benefici: An Italian vampire, said to be on the side of goodness, and a mortal enemy of all evil vampires.

It was a relief, that one small entry, the one myth among hundreds that claimed the

existence of good vampires, a faint glimmer of hope.

Overall, though, there was little that coincided with Nevaeh's stories or my own observations. I'd made a little catalogue in my mind as I'd read and carefully compared it with each myth. Speed, strength, beauty, pale skin, eyes that shift color; and then Nevaeh's criteria: blood drinkers, enemies of the werewolf, cold-skinned, and immortal. There were very few myths that matched even one factor.

And then another problem, one that I'd remembered from the small number of scary movies that I'd seen and was backed up by today's reading - vampires couldn't come out in the daytime, the sun would burn them to a

cinder. They slept in coffins all day and came out only at night.

Aggravated, I snapped off the computer's main power switch, not waiting to shut things down properly, a frustrated, impulsive act. Through my irritation, I felt overwhelming embarrassment. It was all so stupid. I was sitting in my room, researching vampires. What was wrong with me? I decided that most of the blame belonged on the doorstep of the town of Rockville – and the entire sodden Olympic Peninsula, for that matter, its perpetual dampness a breeding ground for madness.

I had to get out of the house, but there was nowhere I wanted to go that didn't involve a three-day drive, a journey I couldn't

undertake. I pulled on my boots anyway, unclear where I was headed, and went downstairs. I shrugged into my raincoat without checking the weather, a defiant gesture against the inevitable, and stomped out the door.

It was overcast, but not raining yet, a brief reprieve. I ignored my truck and started east on foot, angling across Marcellus's yard toward the ever-encroaching forest, its dark embrace beckoning. It didn't take long till I was deep enough for the house and the road to be invisible, swallowed by the dense foliage, for the only sound to be the squish of the damp earth under my feet and the sudden cries of the jays, their calls piercing the silence.

There was a thin ribbon of a trail that led through the forest here, or I wouldn't risk wandering on my own like this. My sense of direction was hopeless; I could get lost in much less helpful surroundings. The trail wound deeper and deeper into the forest, mostly east as far as I could tell, a serpentine path. It snaked around the Sitka spruces and the hemlocks, the yews and the maples, their ancient branches forming a dense canopy. I only vaguely knew the names of the trees around me, and all I knew was due to Marcellus pointing them out to me from the cruiser window in earlier days. There were many I didn't know, and others I couldn't be sure about because they were so covered in green parasites, their forms obscured.

I followed the trail as long as my anger at myself pushed me forward, a relentless, internal engine. As that started to ebb, I slowed, my pace becoming more deliberate. A few drops of moisture trickled down from the canopy above me, but I couldn't be certain if it was beginning to rain or if it was simply pools left over from yesterday, held high in the leaves above me, slowly dripping their way back to the earth. A recently fallen tree – I knew it was recent because it wasn't entirely carpeted in moss – rested against the trunk of one of her sisters, creating a sheltered little bench just a few safe feet off the trail. I stepped over the ferns and sat carefully, making sure my jacket was between the damp seat and my clothes wherever they touched,

and leaned my hooded head back against the living tree, its rough bark a cool comfort.

This was the wrong place to have come. I should have known, but where else was there to go? The forest was deep green and far too much like the scene in last night's dream to allow for peace of mind, its oppressive beauty mirroring my internal turmoil. Now that there was no longer the sound of my soggy footsteps, the silence was piercing, almost deafening. The birds were quiet, too, the drops increasing in frequency, so it must be raining above. The ferns stood higher than my head, now that I was seated, and I knew someone could walk by on the path, three feet away, and not see me, my hiding place perfect.

Here in the trees it was much easier to believe the absurdities that embarrassed me indoors. Nothing had changed in this forest for thousands of years, its ancient silence unbroken, and all the myths and legends of a hundred different lands seemed much more likely in this green haze than they had in my clear-cut bedroom, their fantastical elements suddenly plausible.

I forced myself to focus on the two most vital questions I had to answer, but I did so unwillingly, my mind resisting the inevitable.

First, I had to decide if it was possible that what Nevaeh had said about the Ainsleys could be true.

Immediately my mind responded with a resounding negative. It was silly and morbid to entertain such ridiculous notions. But what, then? I asked myself. There was no rational explanation for how I was alive at this moment. I listed again in my head the things I'd observed myself: the impossible speed and strength, the eye color shifting from black to gold and back again, the inhuman beauty, the pale, frigid skin. And more – small things that registered slowly – how they never seemed to eat, the disturbing grace with which they moved. And the way he sometimes spoke, with unfamiliar cadences and phrases that better fit the style of a turn-of-the-century novel than that of a twenty-first-century classroom. He had skipped class the day we'd done blood typing. He hadn't said no to the beach trip till

he heard where we were going. He seemed to know what everyone around him was thinking... except me. He had told me he was the villain, dangerous...

Could the Ainsleys be vampires?

Well, they were something. Something outside the possibility of rational justification was taking place in front of my incredulous eyes. Whether it be Nevaeh's cold ones or my own superhero theory, Eryndor Ainsley was not... human. He was something more.

So then - maybe. That would have to be my answer for now, a tentative, terrifying acceptance.

And then the most important question of all. What was I going to do if it was true?

If Eryndor was a vampire – I could hardly make myself think the words, the concept too monstrous – then what should I do? Involving someone else was definitely out. I couldn't even believe myself; anyone I told would have me committed, locked away.

Only two options seemed practical. The first was to take his advice: to be smart, to avoid him as much as possible. To cancel our plans, to go back to ignoring him as far as I was able. To pretend there was an impenetrably thick glass wall between us in the one class where we were forced together. To tell him to leave me alone – and mean it this time.

I was gripped in a sudden agony of despair as I considered that alternative, the thought of

his absence a profound pain. My mind rejected the pain, quickly skipping on to the next option, a desperate search for relief.

I could do nothing different. After all, if he was something... sinister, he'd done nothing to hurt me so far. In fact, I would be a dent in Tyler's fender if he hadn't acted so quickly. So quickly, I argued with myself, that it might have been sheer reflexes. But if it was a reflex to save lives, how bad could he be? I retorted. My head spun around in answerless circles, a dizzying, frustrating loop.

There was one thing I was sure of, if I was sure of anything. The dark Eryndor in my dream last night was a reflection only of my fear of the word Nevaeh had spoken, and not Eryndor himself. Even so, when I'd screamed

out in terror at the werewolf's lunge, it wasn't fear for the wolf that brought the cry of 'no' to my lips. It was fear that he would be harmed – even as he called to me with sharp-edged fangs, I feared for him.

And I knew in that I had my answer. I didn't know if there ever was a choice, really. I was already in too deep. Now that I knew – if I knew – I could do nothing about my frightening secret. Because when I thought of him, of his voice, his hypnotic eyes, the magnetic force of his personality, I wanted nothing more than to be with him right now. Even if... but I couldn't think it. Not here, alone in the darkening forest. Not while the rain made it dim as twilight under the canopy and pattered like footsteps across the matted

earthen floor. I shivered and rose quickly from my place of concealment, worried that somehow the path would have disappeared with the rain, swallowed by the encroaching wilderness.

But it was there, safe and clear, winding its way out of the dripping green maze. I followed it hastily, my hood pulled close around my face, becoming surprised, as I nearly ran through the trees, at how far I had come. I started to wonder if I was heading out at all, or following the path farther into the confines of the forest. Before I could get too panicky, though, I began to glimpse some open spaces through the webbed branches. And then I could hear a car passing on the street, and I was free, Marcellus's lawn stretched out

in front of me, the house beckoning me,
promising warmth and dry socks.

It was just noon when I got back inside. I went upstairs and got dressed for the day, jeans and a t-shirt, since I was staying indoors. It didn't take too much effort to concentrate on my task for the day, a paper on Macbeth that was due Wednesday. I settled into outlining a rough draft contentedly, more serene than I'd felt since... well, since Thursday afternoon, if I was being honest, a rare and welcome peace.

That had always been my way, though. Making decisions was the painful part for me, the part I agonized over, the internal struggle. But once the decision was made, I simply followed through - usually with relief that the choice was made, the burden lifted.

Sometimes the relief was tainted by despair, like my decision to come to Rockville. But it was still better than wrestling with the alternatives, the endless, agonizing possibilities.

This decision was ridiculously easy to live with. Dangerously easy.

And so the day was quiet, productive – I finished my paper before eight. Marcellus came home with a large catch, the scent of fresh fish filling the house, and I made a mental note to pick up a book of recipes for fish while I was in Seattle next week, a small, domestic thought. The chills that flashed up my spine whenever I thought of that trip were no different than the ones I'd felt before I'd taken my walk with Nevaeh Black. They

should be different, I thought. I should be afraid – I knew I should be, but I couldn't feel the right kind of fear, the primal terror that should accompany such knowledge.

I slept dreamlessly that night, exhausted from beginning my day so early, and sleeping so poorly the night before. I woke, for the second time since arriving in Rockville, to the bright yellow light of a sunny day, a startling, welcome change. I skipped to the window, stunned to see that there was hardly a cloud in the sky, and those there were just fleecy little white puffs that couldn't possibly be carrying any rain. I opened the window – surprised when it opened silently, without sticking, not having opened it in who knows how many years – and sucked in the relatively dry air, a

deep, cleansing breath. It was nearly warm and hardly windy at all. My blood was electric in my veins, a vibrant hum of anticipation.

Marcellus was finishing breakfast when I came downstairs, and he picked up on my mood immediately, a subtle shift in his demeanor.

'Nice day out,' he commented, a rare observation from him.

'Yes,' I agreed with a grin, my face alight.

He smiled back, his brown eyes crinkling around the edges, a genuine warmth. When Marcellus smiled, it was easier to see why he and my mother had jumped too quickly into an early marriage, a youthful impulsiveness. Most of the young romantic he'd been in those days

had faded before I'd known him, as the curly brown hair – the same color, if not the same texture, as mine – had dwindled, slowly revealing more and more of the shiny skin of his forehead. But when he smiled I could see a little of the man who had run away with Renée when she was just two years older than I was now.

I ate breakfast cheerily, watching the dust motes stirring in the sunlight that streamed in the back window, a mundane beauty.

Marcellus called out a goodbye, and I heard the cruiser pull away from the house, its engine fading into the distance. I hesitated on my way out the door, hand on my rain jacket. It would be tempting fate to leave it home, a foolish act of defiance. With a sigh, I folded it

over my arm and stepped out into the brightest light I'd seen in months, a world reborn.

By dint of much elbow grease, I was able to get both windows in the truck almost completely rolled down, the glass resisting stubbornly. I was one of the first ones to school; I hadn't even checked the clock in my hurry to get outside, eager for the day to begin. I parked and headed toward the seldom-used picnic benches on the south side of the cafeteria. The benches were still a little damp, so I sat on my jacket, glad to have a use for it, a small comfort. My homework was done – the product of a slow social life – but there were a few Trig problems I wasn't sure I had right. I took out my book industriously, but

halfway through rechecking the first problem I was daydreaming, watching the sunlight play on the red-barked trees, their vibrant color a stark contrast to the usual gray. I sketched inattentively along the margins of my homework. After a few minutes, I suddenly realized I'd drawn five pairs of dark eyes staring out of the page at me. I scrubbed them out with the eraser, a frantic, almost violent act.

'Ava Nattalie!' I heard someone call, and it sounded like Kaelen.

I looked around to realize that the school had become populated while I'd been sitting there, absentminded. Everyone was in t-shirts, some even in shorts though the temperature couldn't be over sixty, a surprising display of

skin. Kaelen was coming toward me in khaki shorts and a striped Rugby shirt, waving, his smile wide.

'Hey, Kaelen,' I called, waving back, unable to be halfhearted on a morning like this, the sunlight infusing me with an unfamiliar energy.

He came to sit by me, the tidy spikes of his hair shining golden in the light, his grin stretching across his face. He was so delighted to see me, I couldn't help but feel gratified, a small, unexpected pleasure.

'I never noticed before – your hair has red in it,' he commented, catching between his fingers a strand that was fluttering in the light breeze, a gentle touch.

'Only in the sun.'

I became just a little uncomfortable as he tucked the lock behind my ear, his fingers brushing my skin.

'Great day, isn't it?'

'My kind of day,' I agreed, a genuine smile.

'What did you do yesterday?' His tone was just a bit too proprietary, a subtle possessiveness.

'I mostly worked on my essay.' I didn't add that I was finished with it – no need to sound smug.

He hit his forehead with the heel of his hand. 'Oh yeah – that's due Thursday, right?'

'Um, Wednesday, I think.'

'Wednesday?' He frowned, his face falling.
'That's not good... What are you writing yours
on?'

'Whether Shakespeare's treatment of the
female characters is misogynistic.'

He stared at me like I'd just spoken in pig
Latin, his eyes wide with incomprehension.

'I guess I'll have to get to work on that
tonight,' he said, deflated. 'I was going to ask
if you wanted to go out.'

'Oh.' I was taken off guard, the sudden
shift in conversation jarring. Why couldn't I
ever have a pleasant conversation with Kaelen
anymore without it getting awkward?

'Well, we could go to dinner or something... and I could work on it later.' He smiled at me hopefully, a desperate plea.

'Kaelen...' I hated being put on the spot, the pressure to respond. 'I don't think that would be the best idea.'

His face fell, his eyes guarded. My thoughts flickered to Eryndor, wondering if that's where his thoughts were as well, if he suspected the true reason for my reluctance.

'I think... and if you ever repeat what I'm saying right now I will cheerfully beat you to death,' I threatened, my voice low, a feigned menace, 'but I think that would hurt Selene's feelings.'

He was bewildered, obviously not thinking in that direction at all. 'Selene?'

'Really, Kaelen, are you blind?'

'Oh,' he exhaled – clearly dazed. I took advantage of that to make my escape.

'It's time for class, and I can't be late again.' I gathered my books up and stuffed them in my bag, a quick, efficient movement.

We walked in silence to building three, and his expression was distracted, his brow furrowed in thought. I hoped whatever thoughts he was immersed in were leading him in the right direction, away from me.

When I saw Selene in Trig, she was bubbling with enthusiasm. She, Seraphina,

and Elara were going to Port Angeles tonight to go dress shopping for the dance, and she wanted me to come, too, even though I didn't need one. I was indecisive. It would be nice to get out of town with some girlfriends, but Elara would be there, her presence a deterrent. And who knew what I could be doing tonight... But that was definitely the wrong path to let my mind wander down, a dangerous rabbit hole. Of course, I was happy about the sunlight. But that wasn't completely responsible for the euphoric mood I was in, not even close.

So I gave her a maybe, telling her I'd have to talk with Marcellus first.

She talked of nothing but the dance on the way to Spanish, continuing as if without an

interruption when class finally ended, five minutes late, and we were on our way to lunch. I was far too lost in my own frenzy of anticipation to notice much of what she said, her words a distant hum. I was painfully eager to see not just him but all the Ainsleys – to compare them with the new suspicions that plagued my mind, to find confirmation of Nevaeh's chilling tale. As I crossed the threshold of the cafeteria, I felt the first true tingle of fear slither down my spine and settle in my stomach. Would they be able to know what I was thinking? And then a different feeling jolted through me – would Eryndor be waiting to sit with me again?

As was my routine, I glanced first toward the Ainsleys' table. A shiver of panic trembled

in my stomach as I realized it was empty. With dwindling hope, my eyes scoured the rest of the cafeteria, hoping to find him alone, waiting for me, a solitary figure. The place was nearly filled – Spanish had made us late – but there was no sign of Eryndor or any of his family. Desolation hit me with crippling strength, a crushing disappointment.

I shambled along behind Selene, not bothering to pretend to listen anymore, her chatter a meaningless drone.

We were late enough that everyone was already at our table. I avoided the empty chair next to Kaelen in favor of one by Seraphina, a silent avoidance. I vaguely noticed that Kaelen held the chair out politely for Selene, and that

her face lit up in response, a small victory for him.

Seraphina asked a few quiet questions about the Macbeth paper, which I answered as naturally as I could while spiraling downward in misery, my thoughts consumed by Eryndor's absence. She, too, invited me to go with them tonight, and I agreed now, grasping at anything to distract myself, to escape my own thoughts.

I realized I'd been holding on to a last shred of hope when I entered Biology, saw his empty seat, and felt a new wave of disappointment, a fresh pang of despair.

The rest of the day passed slowly, dismally. In Gym, we had a lecture on the

rules of badminton, the next torture they had lined up for me, a sport I was sure to excel at in clumsiness. But at least it meant I got to sit and listen instead of stumbling around on the court. The best part was the coach didn't finish, so I got another day off tomorrow, a small, unexpected reprieve. Never mind that the day after they would arm me with a racket before unleashing me on the rest of the class.

I was glad to leave campus, so I would be free to pout and mope before I went out tonight with Selene and company. But right after I walked in the door of Marcellus's house, Selene called to cancel our plans. I tried to be happy that Kaelen had asked her out to dinner – I really was relieved that he finally seemed to be catching on – but my

enthusiasm sounded false in my own ears, a hollow echo. She rescheduled our shopping trip for tomorrow night.

Which left me with little in the way of distractions, my carefully planned escape routes now closed. I had fish marinating for dinner, with a salad and bread left over from the night before, so there was nothing to do there. I spent a focused half hour on homework, but then I was through with that, too. I checked my e-mail, reading the backlog of letters from my mother, getting snippier as they progressed to the present, her anxiety palpable even through the screen. I sighed and typed a quick response.

Mom,

Sorry. I've been out. I went to
the beach with some friends. And I
had to write a paper.

My excuses were fairly pathetic, so I gave
up on that.

It's sunny outside today - I
know, I'm shocked, too - so I'm
going to go outside and soak up as
much vitamin D as I can. I love
you,

Ava Nattalie.

I decided to kill an hour with non-school-
related reading. I had a small collection of
books that came with me to Rockville, the
shabbiest volume being a compilation of the
works of Jane Austen. I selected that one and

headed to the backyard, grabbing a ragged old quilt from the linen cupboard at the top of the stairs on my way down.

Outside in Marcellus's small, square yard, I folded the quilt in half and laid it out of the reach of the trees' shadows on the thick lawn that would always be slightly wet, no matter how long the sun shone, a perpetual dampness. I lay on my stomach, crossing my ankles in the air, flipping through the different novels in the book, trying to decide which would occupy my mind the most thoroughly. My favorites were *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility*. I'd read the first most recently, so I started into *Sense and Sensibility*, only to remember after I began three that the hero of the story happened to be

named Edward. Angrily, I turned to Mansfield Park, but the hero of that piece was named Edmund, and that was just too close. Weren't there any other names available in the late eighteenth century? I snapped the book shut, annoyed, and rolled over onto my back. I pushed my sleeves up as high as they would go, and closed my eyes. I would think of nothing but the warmth on my skin, I told myself severely, a desperate attempt to control my thoughts. The breeze was still light, but it blew tendrils of my hair around my face, and that tickled a bit. I pulled all my hair over my head, letting it fan out on the quilt above me, and focused again on the heat that touched my eyelids, my cheekbones, my nose, my lips, my forearms, my neck, soaked through my light shirt...

The next thing I was conscious of was the sound of Marcellus's cruiser turning onto the bricks of the driveway, a familiar, comforting sound. I sat up in surprise, realizing the light was gone, behind the trees, and I had fallen asleep, lost in the warmth. I looked around, muddled, with the sudden feeling that I wasn't alone.

'Marcellus?' I asked. But I could hear his door slamming in front of the house, a definitive sound.

I jumped up, foolishly edgy, gathering the now-damp quilt and my book. I ran inside to get some oil heating on the stove, realizing that dinner would be late. Marcellus was hanging up his gun belt and stepping out of

his boots when I came in, his movements slow and deliberate.

'Sorry, Dad, dinner's not ready yet - I fell asleep outside.' I stifled a yawn, a lingering exhaustion.

'Don't worry about it,' he said. 'I wanted to catch the score on the game, anyway.'

I watched TV with Marcellus after dinner, for something to do, to fill the silence. There wasn't anything on I wanted to watch, but he knew I didn't like baseball, so he turned it to some mindless sitcom that neither of us enjoyed, its canned laughter filling the room. He seemed happy, though, to be doing something together, a shared moment. And it

felt good, despite my depression, to make him happy, a small, unexpected warmth.

'Dad,' I said during a commercial, 'Selene and Seraphina are going to look at dresses for the dance tomorrow night in Port Angeles, and they wanted me to help them choose... do you mind if I go with them?'

'Selene Stanley?' he asked, his brow furrowed in thought.

'And Seraphina Weber.' I sighed as I gave him the details, the names a litany.

He was confused. 'But you're not going to the dance, right?'

'No, Dad, but I'm helping them find dresses - you know, giving them constructive

criticism.' I wouldn't have to explain this to a woman, the nuances of female friendship.

'Well, okay.' He seemed to realize that he was out of his depth with the girlie stuff, a quick retreat. 'It's a school night, though.'

'We'll leave right after school, so we can get back early. You'll be okay for dinner, right?'

'Nadd, I fed myself for seventeen years before you got here,' he reminded me, a dry humor in his voice.

'I don't know how you survived,' I muttered, then added more clearly, 'I'll leave some things for cold-cut sandwiches in the fridge, okay? Right on top.'

It was sunny again in the morning, a rare and welcome sight. I awakened with renewed hope that I grimly tried to suppress, a battle against optimism. I dressed for the warmer weather in a deep blue V-neck blouse – something I'd worn in the dead of winter in Phoenix, a testament to its warmth.

I had planned my arrival at school so that I barely had time to make it to class, a deliberate timing. With a sinking heart, I circled the full lot looking for a space, while also searching for the silver Volvo that was clearly not there, its absence a fresh pang of disappointment. I parked in the last row and hurried to English, arriving breathless, but subdued, before the final bell.

It was the same as yesterday – I just couldn't keep little sprouts of hope from budding in my mind, only to have them squashed painfully as I searched the lunchroom in vain and sat at my empty Biology table.

The Port Angeles scheme was back on again for tonight and made all the more attractive by the fact that Elara had other obligations, her absence a small blessing. I was anxious to get out of town so I could...

Chapter Ten: Unvillg

His face softened. 'Nevaeh,' he murmured, his voice a low, almost tender sound. 'Let's not try for three, agreed?'

I scowled, a fleeting expression of annoyance, but nodded, a silent concession. He moved his hand out from under mine, placing it flat on the table, a subtle barrier, and I felt the lingering chill where his skin had touched mine. I picked up a breadstick and began nibbling on the end, measuring his expression, wondering when it would be acceptable to begin my barrage of questions.

'Usually you're in a better mood when your eyes are so light,' I commented, trying to distract him from whatever somber thought had left him frowning.

He stared at me, stunned, his perfect features momentarily frozen. 'What?'

'You're always crabbiest when your eyes are black – I expect it then,' I went on, the words tumbling out, 'I have a theory about that.'

His eyes narrowed, a flicker of something unreadable. 'More theories?'

'Mm-hm.' I chewed on a small bite of the bread, trying to look indifferent, to feign a casual air.

'I hope you were more creative this time... or are you still stealing from comic books?' His faint smile was mocking, a hint of derision; his eyes were still tight, guarded.

'Well, no, I didn't get it from a comic book, but I didn't come up with it on my own, either,' I confessed, a small admission.

'And?' he prompted, his voice low, expectant.

But then the waitress, Astrid, strode around the partition with my food. I realized we'd been unconsciously leaning toward each other across the table, drawn by an invisible current, because we both straightened up as she approached. She set the dish in front of me - it looked pretty good, a steaming mound of mushroom ravioli - and turned quickly to Eryndor.

'Did you change your mind?' she asked, her voice overly sweet. 'Isn't there anything I can get you?' I may have been imagining the double meaning in her words, the subtle flirtation.

He looked at me, a silent question in his eyes.

'I'll have a pop,' I said, the words sounding like a question, a hesitant request.

'Two pops,' he said to Astrid, his voice firm.

'I'll be right back with that,' she assured him with another unnecessary smile, her gaze lingering. But he didn't seem to see it. He was watching me, his eyes fixed on my face.

'What?' I asked when she left, unnerved by his intensity.

His eyes stayed fixed on my face. 'How are you feeling?'

'I'm fine,' I replied, surprised by his persistent concern.

'You don't feel dizzy, sick, cold... ?'

'Should I?' I asked, a puzzled tone in my voice.

He chuckled at my bewildered expression.

'Well, I'm actually waiting for you to go into shock.' His face twisted up into that perfect crooked smile, a hint of dark amusement.

'I don't think that will happen,' I said after I could breathe again, a small, shaky laugh escaping me. 'I've always been very good at repressing unpleasant things.'

'Just the same, I'll feel better when you have some sugar and food in you.'

Right on cue, Astrid appeared with our drinks and a basket of breadsticks. She stood with her back to me as she placed them on the table, her movements efficient.

'Are you ready to order?' she asked Eryndor.

'Nevaeh?' he asked, his gaze shifting to me. She turned unwillingly toward me, her smile faltering.

I picked the first thing I saw on the menu. 'Um... I'll have the mushroom ravioli.'

'And you?' She turned back to him with a smile, her attention fixed.

'Nothing for me,' he said. Of course not.

'Let me know if you change your mind.'

The coy smile was still in place, but he wasn't looking at her, and she left, a faint air of dissatisfaction clinging to her.

'Drink,' he ordered, his voice low, authoritative.

I sipped at my soda obediently, and then drank more deeply, surprised by how thirsty I was. I realized I had finished the whole thing when he pushed his glass toward me, still full.

'Thanks,' I muttered, still thirsty. The cold from the icy soda was radiating through my chest, and I shivered, a sudden chill.

'Are you cold?'

'It's just the pop,' I explained, shivering again, a physical manifestation of the cold.

'Don't you have a jacket?' His voice was disapproving, a hint of reprimand.

'Yes.' I looked at the empty bench next to me, a sudden realization. 'Oh – I left it in Selene's car,' I confessed.

Eryndor was shrugging out of his jacket. I suddenly realized that I had never once noticed what he was wearing – not just tonight, but ever. I just couldn't seem to look away from his face, his mesmerizing features. I made myself look now, focusing. He was removing a light beige leather jacket now; underneath he wore an ivory turtleneck

sweater. It fit him snugly, emphasizing how muscular his chest was, a lean, powerful build.

He handed me the jacket, interrupting my ogling, my silent admiration.

'Thanks,' I said again, sliding my arms into his jacket. It was cold – the way my jacket felt when I first picked it up in the morning, hanging in the drafty hallway. I shivered again. It smelled amazing. I inhaled, trying to identify the delicious scent. It didn't smell like cologne. The sleeves were much too long; I shoved them back so I could free my hands.

'That color blue looks lovely with your skin,' he said, watching me, a faint smile touching his lips. I was surprised; I looked

down, flushing, of course, a familiar heat rising to my cheeks.

He pushed the bread basket toward me.

'Really, I'm not going into shock,' I protested, my voice a little strained.

'You should be - a normal person would be. You don't even look shaken.' He seemed unsettled, a faint frown creasing his brow. He stared into my eyes, and I saw how light his eyes were, lighter than I'd ever seen them, golden butterscotch, almost luminous.

'I feel very safe with you,' I confessed, mesmerized into telling the truth again, the words escaping before I could censor them.

That displeased him; his alabaster brow furrowed. He shook his head, frowning, a subtle shift in his perfect features.

'This is more complicated than I'd planned,' he murmured to himself, his voice almost inaudible.

I picked up a breadstick and began nibbling on the end, measuring his expression, trying to decipher his thoughts. I wondered when it would be okay to start questioning him, to demand the answers I craved.

'Usually you're in a better mood when your eyes are so light,' I commented, trying to distract him from whatever thought had left him frowning and somber.

He stared at me, stunned. 'What?'

'You're always crabbiest when your eyes are black – I expect it then,' I went on, my voice gaining confidence. 'I have a theory about that.'

His eyes narrowed, a flicker of something unreadable. 'More theories?'

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'Did you change your mind?' she asked. 'Isn't there anything I can get you?' I may have been imagining the double meaning in her words, the subtle flirtation.

'No, thank you, but some more soda would be nice.' He gestured with a long white hand to the empty cups in front of me.

'Sure.' She removed the empty glasses and walked away.

'You were saying?' he asked, his voice low, expectant.

'I'll tell you about it in the car. If...' I paused, a deliberate hesitation.

'There are conditions?' He raised one eyebrow, his voice ominous, a hint of amusement.

'I do have a few questions, of course.'

'Of course.'

Astrid was back with two more pops. She sat them down without a word this time, and left again.

I took a sip.

'Well, go ahead,' he pushed, his voice still hard, demanding.

I started with the most undemanding. Or so I thought. 'Why are you in Port Angeles?'

He looked down, folding his large hands together slowly on the table, his movements deliberate. His eyes flickered up at me from under his lashes, the hint of a smirk on his face.

'Next.'

'But that's the easiest one,' I objected, a frustrated sigh escaping me.

'Next,' he repeated, his voice firm, unwavering.

I looked down, frustrated. I unrolled my silverware, picked up my fork, and carefully speared a ravioli. I put it in my mouth slowly, still looking down, chewing while I thought. The mushrooms were good. I swallowed and took another sip of pop before I looked up.

'Okay, then.' I glared at him, and continued slowly, carefully. 'Let's say, hypothetically of course, that... someone... could know what people are thinking, read minds, you know - with a few exceptions.'

'Just one exception,' he corrected, his voice flat, 'hypothetically.'

'All right, with one exception, then.' I was thrilled that he was playing along, but I tried

to seem casual, to maintain a facade of indifference.

'How does that work? What are the limitations? How would... that someone... find someone else at exactly the right time? How would he know she was in trouble?' I wondered if my convoluted questions even made sense, if he could follow my frantic logic.

'Hypothetically?' he asked, a faint smile touching his lips.

'Sure.'

'Well, if... that someone...'

'Let's call him 'Joe,' I suggested, a small, nervous laugh escaping me.

He smiled wryly. 'Joe, then. If Joe had been paying attention, the timing wouldn't have needed to be quite so exact.' He shook his head, rolling his eyes, a hint of exasperation. 'Only you could get into trouble in a town this small. You would have devastated their crime rate statistics for a decade, you know.'

'We were speaking of a hypothetical case,' I reminded him frostily, a sharp edge to my voice.

He laughed at me, a low, musical sound, his eyes warm, amused.

'Yes, we were,' he agreed. 'Shall we call you 'Jane'?'

'How did you know?' I asked, unable to curb my intensity, my voice a breathless

whisper. I realized I was leaning toward him again, drawn by an irresistible force.

He seemed to be wavering, torn by some internal dilemma, his perfect features subtly shifting. His eyes locked with mine, and I guessed he was making the decision right then whether or not to simply tell me the truth, to reveal everything.

'You can trust me, you know,' I murmured, my voice soft, pleading. I reached forward, without thinking, to touch his folded hands, but he slid them away minutely, a subtle, almost imperceptible movement, and I pulled my hand back, stung by the rejection.

'I don't know if I have a choice anymore.'

His voice was almost a whisper, a raw,

vulnerable admission. 'I was wrong – you're much more observant than I gave you credit for.'

'I thought you were always right.'

'I used to be.' He shook his head again, a profound weariness in the gesture. 'I was wrong about you on one other thing, as well. You're not a magnet for accidents – that's not a broad enough classification. You are a magnet for trouble. If there is anything dangerous within a ten-mile radius, it will invariably find you.'

'And you put yourself into that category?' I guessed, my voice barely a whisper.

His face turned cold, expressionless, a mask of stone. 'Unequivocally.'

I stretched my hand across the table again – ignoring him when he pulled back slightly once more – to touch the back of his hand shyly with my fingertips. His skin was cold and hard, like a stone, utterly devoid of warmth.

'Thank you.' My voice was fervent with gratitude, a raw, heartfelt emotion. 'That's twice now.'

His face softened. 'Let's not try for three, agreed?'

I scowled, but nodded. He moved his hand out from under mine, placing it flat on the table, a silent, almost imperceptible gesture.

'My theory,' I began, my voice low, almost conspiratorial, 'is that your eyes change color based on... well, on what you've had for

dinner.' I watched his face carefully, trying to gauge his reaction.

He stared at me, his expression unreadable for a long moment. Then, a slow, deliberate smile stretched his lips, a chilling, knowing curve. 'And what do you think I've had for dinner tonight, Nevaeh?' His voice was a silken whisper, laced with a dangerous amusement.

My breath hitched. His eyes, the golden butterscotch, seemed to deepen, to swirl with an unspoken hunger. He leaned forward, just slightly, and the air around us seemed to thicken, to hum with a primal energy.

'No,' I whispered, my voice barely audible, shaking my head, a desperate denial. 'No. Not tonight. Not... not when they're like this.'

He laughed, a low, musical sound that sent shivers down my spine, a sound of profound, ancient amusement. 'You are more observant than I thought.' He settled back in his seat, the tension in the air receding, leaving behind a lingering chill. 'But you are still wrong about the cause.'

'Then what is it?' I pressed, my voice still a whisper, my gaze fixed on his eyes, desperate for the truth.

He paused, his eyes sweeping over my face, lingering on my lips. 'It is a reflection of... my satiety. The more... satisfied... I am,

the lighter they become. The less... the darker.'

My mind reeled, trying to process the implications of his words. Satisfied. Hungry. The cold, hard truth of Nevaeh's story, of my own terrifying suspicions, slammed into me with the force of a physical blow. He was confirming it. He was a vampire.

'And the black?' I asked, my voice barely a thread of sound.

'The black,' he murmured, his voice dropping to a near whisper, 'is when I am... thirsty.' His eyes, even in their golden state, seemed to hold a fleeting glimpse of that terrifying hunger, a shadow of the predator. 'Very, very thirsty. That is when I am most

dangerous, Nevaeh. That is when you should truly be afraid.'

I stared at him, my heart hammering against my ribs, a frantic drum. The world around us, the bustling restaurant, the soft Italian music, faded into an indistinct hum. Only he existed. Only his words, his terrifying, beautiful truth.

'You are a vampire,' I breathed, the words a fragile, almost disbelieving whisper, yet imbued with an undeniable certainty.

He simply looked at me, his golden eyes deep, unreadable, yet holding a hint of something ancient, something profoundly weary, something that had witnessed centuries of human folly and fear. He didn't

confirm it, didn't deny it. He didn't need to.
The truth hung in the air between us, a
palpable, chilling presence.

'And you are not afraid,' he observed, his
voice a low, almost surprised murmur.

'I... I should be,' I admitted, my voice
trembling. 'But I'm not. Not of you.'

A flicker of something akin to surprise,
perhaps even a strange, fleeting relief, crossed
his face. He reached across the table, his cold
hand brushing mine, a light, almost hesitant
touch. This time, there was no electric jolt,
only the profound, unsettling cold.

'Eat your food, Nevaeh,' he commanded,
his voice soft, yet firm, a gentle authority. 'You
need your strength.'

I picked up my fork, my hand shaking slightly, and stared at the mushroom ravioli, its warmth a stark contrast to the cold, impossible truth that had just been laid bare. The world had irrevocably shifted on its axis. And I, Nevaeh, was standing at its terrifying, exhilarating precipice.

The drive back to Rockville was a blur of rain and silence. The Volvo, usually a cocoon of comfort, now felt like a speeding coffin, carrying me away from the last vestiges of my normal life. Eryndor drove with his usual unnerving precision, his profile a stark, perfect silhouette against the passing lights. His eyes, I noticed, remained that unsettling golden hue, a constant reminder of the chilling truth he had unveiled. I kept my gaze fixed on the rain-

streaked window, watching the familiar landscape transform into something alien, something ominous. Every tree, every shadow, seemed to hold a new, sinister meaning.

When we finally pulled into Marcellus's driveway, the house loomed large and dark, a silent sentinel. The rain had intensified, drumming a relentless rhythm on the roof of the car. Eryndor cut the engine, and the sudden silence was deafening, broken only by the persistent drumming of the rain.

'Are you... are you going to be okay?' His voice was low, a rare note of concern in its depths.

I looked at him, truly looked at him, for the first time since the revelation. His face was

unreadable, a perfect mask, yet there was something in his eyes – a flicker of something ancient, something burdened.

'I don't know,' I whispered, the raw honesty escaping me.

He nodded slowly, a subtle acknowledgment. 'Perhaps it is better this way. Knowing.'

'Better?' I scoffed, a bitter laugh escaping me. 'How is knowing that you're a... a vampire... better?'

He sighed, a sound of profound weariness. 'Because now, Nevaeh, you understand the danger. And perhaps, now, you will finally listen.'

He opened the car door, the sound a soft thud, and stepped out into the pouring rain. I fumbled with my seatbelt, my fingers clumsy. When I finally got out, he was already at my side, holding the door open for me. His presence, even in the rain, was a stark, almost luminous contrast to the darkness.

'I will see you tomorrow,' he said, his voice a low, musical murmur, a promise and a threat intertwined.

I nodded, unable to speak, my mind reeling. He closed the car door, and I watched as he melted back into the shadows, a silent, impossible figure vanishing into the night. I stood there for a long moment, drenched by the rain, the chill seeping into my bones, but it

was the cold, hard truth in my mind that truly froze me.

I walked into the house like a zombie, my movements stiff, automatic. Marcellus was asleep on the couch, the television flickering with the muted glow of a late-night infomercial. I crept upstairs, careful not to wake him, and collapsed onto my bed, still fully dressed. The rain outside seemed to amplify the silence in my room, a hollow echo of the storm raging within me.

I lay there, staring at the ceiling, the word 'vampire' echoing in my mind, a relentless, terrifying mantra. Every detail of Eryndor's impossible existence, every chilling implication, played out in a dizzying, relentless loop. His speed, his strength, his coldness, his

eyes, his hunger. And the fact that he was here, in Rockville, in my life.

Sleep was an impossible dream. My mind raced, trying to reconcile the fantastical with the mundane, the ancient legends with the boy who sat next to me in Biology. The world had cracked open, revealing a hidden, terrifying reality. And I, Nevaeh, was now a part of it. A small, insignificant human caught in the unseen current of something vast and dangerous. The whispers of the Nevaeh Saga, of ancient beings and interwoven destinies, resonated with a new, chilling clarity. This wasn't just a local legend; it was a fragment of a much larger, darker tapestry, a truth that stretched across realms and ages, and I, unwittingly, had stepped into its path.

The Nevaeh Saga, a collection of ancient texts and oral traditions, was not merely a series of quaint myths to be dismissed. In the quiet, damp corners of my mind, where logic wrestled with the impossible, I understood now why it held such a profound, almost sacred, importance. It was a map. A terrifying, cryptic map to a world I had stumbled into, a world where the impossible walked among us. Nevaeh's stories, once dismissed as mere folklore, were now imbued with a chilling veracity, a terrifying relevance. The Saga, I realized, was not just a historical record; it was a living prophecy, a guide to understanding the ancient conflicts, the delicate balance, and the hidden truths that

governed the existence of beings like Eryndor. It was a chronicle of power, of weakness, of alliances and betrayals that stretched back through time, a narrative that now, terrifyingly, included me. I needed to read it, to absorb its every word, not out of academic curiosity, but out of a desperate, primal need for survival, for understanding, for a way to navigate this new, perilous terrain. It was the only compass I had in this sudden, bewildering darkness, the only hope of finding my way through the unseen currents that now pulled at my very soul.

The Saga spoke of the Veil, the delicate boundary between their world and ours, and the dire consequences when it thinned,

allowing ancient forces to bleed through. It detailed the subtle signs, the shifts in the natural world, the unsettling coincidences that foreshadowed greater disturbances. More than that, it hinted at the profound, often tragic, connections that could form between the 'Veiled' and the 'Unveiled,' bonds that defied logic and fate, yet were woven into the very fabric of existence. It was a warning, a lament, and a desperate plea for those who might one day find themselves entangled in its timeless narrative.

All the theoretical truths...

'Can I ask just one more?' I pleaded as Eryndor accelerated much too quickly down the quiet street. He didn't seem to be paying

any attention to the road, his gaze fixed somewhere beyond the immediate asphalt.

He sighed, a soft exhalation.

'One,' he agreed, his lips pressed together into a cautious line, a subtle warning.

'Well... you said you knew I hadn't gone into the bookstore, and that I had gone south. I was just wondering how you knew that.' My voice was a little too eager, a little too desperate for answers.

He looked away, deliberating, a faint tension in his jaw.

'I thought we were past all the evasiveness,' I grumbled, a hint of frustration in my tone.

He almost smiled, a fleeting, almost imperceptible curve of his lips.

'Fine, then. I followed your scent.' He looked at the road, giving me time to compose my face, to process the unexpected revelation. I couldn't think of an acceptable response to that, but I filed it carefully away for future study, another piece of the bewildering puzzle. I tried to refocus. I wasn't ready to let him be finished, now that he was finally explaining things, finally offering glimpses into his impossible world.

'And then you didn't answer one of my first questions...' I stalled, letting the words hang in the air.

He looked at me with disapproval, a faint frown creasing his brow. 'Which one?'

'How does it work - the mind-reading thing? Can you read anybody's mind, anywhere? How do you do it? Can the rest of your family... ?' I felt silly, asking for clarification on what still felt like make-believe, like a fantastical tale.

'That's more than one,' he pointed out, a dry amusement in his voice. I simply intertwined my fingers and gazed at him, waiting, my patience unwavering.

'No, it's just me. And I can't hear anyone, anywhere. I have to be fairly close. The more familiar someone's... 'voice' is, the farther away I can hear them. But still, no more than a

few miles.' He paused thoughtfully, his gaze distant, as if listening to the unseen chorus of thoughts. 'It's a little like being in a huge hall filled with people, everyone talking at once. It's just a hum - a buzzing of voices in the background. Until I focus on one voice, and then what they're thinking is clear.'

'Most of the time I tune it all out - it can be very distracting. And then it's easier to seem normal' - he frowned as he said the word, a subtle grimace - 'when I'm not accidentally answering someone's thoughts rather than their words.'

'Why do you think you can't hear me?' I asked curiously, a sudden, sharp interest.

He looked at me, his eyes enigmatic,
unreadable.

'I don't know,' he murmured. 'The only
guess I have is that maybe your mind doesn't
work the same way the rest of theirs do. Like
your thoughts are on the AM frequency and
I'm only getting FM.' He grinned at me,
suddenly amused, a flash of white teeth.

'My mind doesn't work right? I'm a freak?'
The words bothered me more than they should
– probably because his speculation hit home.
I'd always suspected as much, and it
embarrassed me to have it confirmed, to have
my deepest insecurity laid bare.

'I hear voices in my mind and you're
worried that you're the freak,' he laughed, a

low, musical sound. 'Don't worry, it's just a theory...' His face tightened, the amusement fading. 'Which brings us back to you.'

I sighed, a weary sound. How to begin?

'Aren't we past all the evasions now?' he reminded me softly, his voice a gentle prod.

I looked away from his face for the first time, trying to find words, to formulate my thoughts. I happened to notice the speedometer, its needle hovering at an alarming number.

'Holy crow!' I shouted, a genuine cry of alarm. 'Slow down!'

'What's wrong?' He was startled, his gaze flicking to me. But the car didn't decelerate, its speed unwavering.

'You're going a hundred miles an hour!' I was still shouting, my voice strained. I shot a panicky glance out the window, but it was too dark to see much. The road was only visible in the long patch of bluish brightness from the headlights. The forest along both sides of the road was like a black wall – as hard as a wall of steel if we veered off the road at this speed.

'Relax, Naddalin.' He rolled his eyes, a subtle gesture of exasperation, still not slowing.

'Are you trying to kill us?' I demanded, my voice tight with fear.

'We're not going to crash.' His voice was calm, utterly confident.

I tried to modulate my voice, to bring it back to a normal pitch. 'Why are you in such a hurry?'

'I always drive like this.' He turned to smile crookedly at me, a flash of perfect teeth.

'Keep your eyes on the road!' I snapped, my voice sharp.

'I've never been in an accident, Naddalin – I've never even gotten a ticket.' He grinned and tapped his forehead. 'Built-in radar detector.'

'Very funny.' I fumed, a hot flush rising to my cheeks. 'Marcellus's a cop, remember? I

was raised to abide by traffic laws. Besides, if you turn us into a Volvo pretzel around a tree trunk, you can probably just walk away.'

'Probably,' he agreed with a short, hard laugh, a chilling admission. 'But you can't.' He sighed, and I watched with relief as the needle gradually drifted toward eighty. 'Happy?'

'Almost.'

'I hate driving slow,' he muttered, a faint grumble.

'This is slow?'

'Enough commentary on my driving,' he snapped, a sudden sharpness in his tone. 'I'm still waiting for your latest theory.'

I bit my lip. He looked down at me, his honey eyes unexpectedly gentle, a surprising softness.

'I won't laugh,' he promised, his voice low, reassuring.

'I'm more afraid that you'll be angry with me.'

'Is it that bad?'

'Pretty much, yeah.'

He waited. I was looking down at my hands, so I couldn't see his expression.

'Go ahead.' His voice was calm, steady.

'I don't know how to start,' I admitted, my voice barely a whisper.

'Why don't you start at the beginning... you said you didn't come up with this on your own.'

'No.'

'What got you started – a book? A movie?' he probed, his voice soft, coaxing.

'No – it was Saturday, at the beach.' I risked a glance up at his face. He looked puzzled, his brow furrowed.

'I ran into an old family friend – Nevaeh Black,' I continued. 'His dad and Marcellus have been friends since I was a baby.'

He still looked confused, his expression unchanging.

'His dad is one of the Quileute elders.' I watched him carefully. His confused

expression froze in place, a subtle tension entering his features. 'We went for a walk -' I edited all my scheming out of the story '- and he was telling me some old legends - trying to scare me, I think. He told me one...' I hesitated, the words catching in my throat.

'Go on,' he said, his voice low, encouraging.

'About vampires.' I realized I was whispering, the word a fragile secret. I couldn't look at his face now. But I saw his knuckles tighten convulsively on the wheel, a white-knuckled grip.

'And you immediately thought of me?' Still calm, impossibly so.

'No. He... mentioned your family.'

He was silent, staring at the road, his profile a mask of stone.

I was worried suddenly, worried about protecting Nevaeh.

'He just thought it was a silly superstition,' I said quickly, the words tumbling out. 'He didn't expect me to think anything of it.' It didn't seem like enough; I had to confess, to lay bare my deception. 'It was my fault, I forced him to tell me.'

'Why?'

'Elara said something about you – she was trying to provoke me. And an older boy from the tribe said your family didn't come to the reservation, only it sounded like he meant something different. So I got Nevaeh alone

and I tricked it out of him,' I admitted, hanging my head, a flush of shame rising to my cheeks.

He startled me by laughing, a sharp, sudden sound. I glared up at him. He was laughing, but his eyes were fierce, staring ahead, a dangerous glint in their depths.

'Tricked him how?' he asked, a hint of amusement in his voice.

'I tried to flirt – it worked better than I thought it would.' Disbelief colored my tone as I remembered, the memory a mortifying blush.

'I'd like to have seen that.' He chuckled darkly. 'And you accused me of dazzling people – poor Nevaeh Black.'

I blushed and looked out my window into the night, seeking refuge in the darkness.

'What did you do then?' he asked after a minute, his voice soft.

'I did some research on the Internet.'

'And did that convince you?' His voice sounded barely interested, almost indifferent. But his hands were clamped hard onto the steering wheel, a white-knuckled grip.

'No. Nothing fit. Most of it was kind of silly. And then...' I stopped, the words catching in my throat.

'What?'

'I decided it didn't matter,' I whispered, the admission a profound truth.

'It didn't matter?' His tone made me look up – I had finally broken through his carefully composed mask. His face was incredulous, with just a hint of the anger I'd feared, a raw, exposed emotion.

'No,' I said softly. 'It doesn't matter to me what you are.'

A hard, mocking edge entered his voice. 'You don't care if I'm a monster? If I'm not human!'

'No.' My voice was firm, unwavering.

He was silent, staring straight ahead again. His face was bleak and cold, a mask of stone.

'You're angry,' I sighed. 'I shouldn't have said anything.'

'No,' he said, but his tone was as hard as his face. 'I'd rather know what you're thinking - even if what you're thinking is insane.'

'So I'm wrong again?' I challenged, a faint defiance.

'That's not what I was referring to. 'It doesn't matter'!' he quoted, gritting his teeth together, the sound a low grind.

'I'm right?' I gasped, a sudden, breathless hope.

'Does it matter?'

I took a deep breath, trying to steady my racing heart.

'Not really.' I paused. 'But I am curious.'

My voice, at least, was composed.

He was suddenly resigned, a subtle slump of his shoulders. 'What are you curious about?'

'How old are you?'

'Seventeen,' he answered promptly, without hesitation.

'And how long have you been seventeen?'

His lips twitched as he stared at the road. 'A while,' he admitted at last, a hint of ancient weariness in his tone.

'Okay.' I smiled, pleased that he was still being honest with me. He stared down at me with watchful eyes, much as he had before, when he was worried I would go into shock. I

smiled wider in encouragement, and he frowned, a subtle disapproval.

'Don't laugh - but how can you come out during the daytime?'

He laughed anyway, a low, musical sound.
'Myth.'

'Burned by the sun?'

'Myth.'

'Sleeping in coffins?'

'Myth.' He hesitated for a moment, and a peculiar tone entered his voice, a subtle shift.
'I can't sleep.'

It took me a minute to absorb that. 'At all?'

'Never,' he said, his voice nearly inaudible. He turned to look at me with a wistful expression. The golden eyes held mine, and I lost my train of thought, mesmerized by their depths. I stared at him until he looked away.

'You haven't asked me the most important question yet.' His voice was hard now, and when he looked at me again his eyes were cold, devoid of warmth.

I blinked, still dazed. 'Which one is that?'

'You aren't concerned about my diet?' he asked sarcastically, a bitter edge to his tone.

'Oh,' I murmured, 'that.'

'Yes, that.' His voice was bleak. 'Don't you want to know if I drink blood?'

I flinched, a sudden, involuntary recoil.

'Well, Nevaeh said something about that.'

'What did Nevaeh say?' he asked flatly, his voice devoid of emotion.

'He said you didn't... hunt people. He said your family wasn't supposed to be dangerous because you only hunted animals.'

'He said we weren't dangerous?' His voice was deeply skeptical, laced with disbelief.

'Not exactly. He said you weren't supposed to be dangerous. But the Quileutes still didn't want you on their land, just in case.'

He looked forward, but I couldn't tell if he was watching the road or not, his gaze unreadable.

'So was he right? About not hunting people?' I tried to keep my voice as even as possible, a forced neutrality.

'The Quileutes have a long memory,' he whispered, the words a chilling confirmation.

I took it as a confirmation.

'Don't let that make you complacent, though,' he warned me. 'They're right to keep their distance from us. We are still dangerous.'

'I don't understand.'

'We try,' he explained slowly. 'We're usually very good at what we do. Sometimes we make mistakes. Me, for example, allowing myself to be alone with you.'

'This is a mistake?' I heard the sadness in my voice, but I didn't know if he could as well, if my vulnerability was apparent.

'A very dangerous one,' he murmured, his voice low, ominous.

We were both silent then. I watched the headlights twist with the curves of the road. They moved too fast; it didn't look real, it looked like a video game. I was aware of the time slipping away so quickly, like the black road beneath us, and I was hideously afraid that I would never have another chance to be with him like this again - openly, the walls between us gone for once. His words hinted at an end, and I recoiled from the idea. I couldn't waste one minute I had with him.

'Tell me more,' I asked desperately, not caring what he said, just so I could hear his voice again, its melodic tone a strange comfort.

He looked at me quickly, startled by the change in my tone. 'What more do you want to know?'

'Tell me why you hunt animals instead of people,' I suggested, my voice still tinged with desperation. I realized my eyes were wet, and I fought against the grief that was trying to overpower me, a sudden, inexplicable sorrow.

'I don't want to be a monster.' His voice was very low, a raw admission.

'But animals aren't enough?'

He paused. 'I can't be sure, of course, but I'd compare it to living on tofu and soy milk; we call ourselves vegetarians, our little inside joke. It doesn't completely satiate the hunger – or rather thirst. But it keeps us strong enough to resist. Most of the time.' His tone turned ominous, a chilling undertone.

'Sometimes it's more difficult than others.'

'Is it very difficult for you now?' I asked, my voice barely a whisper.

He sighed. 'Yes.'

'But you're not hungry now,' I said confidently – stating, not asking.

'Why do you think that?'

'Your eyes. I told you I had a theory. I've noticed that people – men in particular – are crabbier when they're hungry.'

He chuckled. 'You are observant, aren't you?'

I didn't answer; I just listened to the sound of his laugh, committing it to memory, a precious, fleeting sound.

'Were you hunting this weekend, with Darius?' I asked when it was quiet again.

'Yes.' He paused for a second, as if deciding whether or not to say something. 'I didn't want to leave, but it was necessary. It's a bit easier to be around you when I'm not thirsty.'

'Why didn't you want to leave?'

'It makes me... anxious... to be away from you.' His eyes were gentle but intense, and they seemed to be making my bones turn soft, a strange, melting sensation. 'I wasn't joking when I asked you to try not to fall in the ocean or get run over last Thursday. I was distracted all weekend, worrying about you. And after what happened tonight, I'm surprised that you did make it through a whole weekend unscathed.' He shook his head, and then seemed to remember something. 'Well, not totally unscathed.'

'What?'

'Your hands,' he reminded me. I looked down at my palms, at the almost-healed

scrapes across the heels of my hands. His eyes missed nothing, his gaze piercing.

'I fell,' I sighed, a weary admission.

'That's what I thought.' His lips curved up at the corners. 'I suppose, being you, it could have been much worse – and that possibility tormented me the entire time I was away. It was a very long three days. I really got on Darius's nerves.' He smiled ruefully at me, a self-deprecating humor.

'Three days? Didn't you just get back today?'

'No, we got back Sunday.'

'Then why weren't any of you in school?' I was frustrated, almost angry as I thought of

how much disappointment I had suffered because of his absence, the gnawing emptiness.

'Well, you asked if the sun hurt me, and it doesn't. But I can't go out in the sunlight - at least, not where anyone can see.'

'Why?'

'I'll show you sometime,' he promised, his voice low, a hint of something more.

I thought about it for a moment.

'You might have called me,' I decided, a faint accusation in my tone.

He was puzzled. 'But I knew you were safe.'

'But I didn't know where you were. I -' I hesitated, dropping my eyes, a blush rising to my cheeks.

'What?' His velvety voice was compelling, drawing the words from me.

'I didn't like it. Not seeing you. It makes me anxious, too.' I blushed to be saying this out loud, to lay bare my unexpected vulnerability.

He was quiet. I glanced up, apprehensive, and saw that his expression was pained, a subtle anguish.

'Ah,' he groaned quietly. 'This is wrong.'

I couldn't understand his response. 'What did I say?'

'Don't you see, Naddalin? It's one thing for me to make myself miserable, but a wholly other thing for you to be so involved.' He turned his anguished eyes to the road, his words flowing almost too fast for me to understand. 'I don't want to hear that you feel that way.' His voice was low but urgent. His words cut me, a sharp, painful blow. 'It's wrong. It's not safe. I'm dangerous, Naddalin – please, grasp that.'

'No.' I tried very hard not to look like a sulky child, to maintain some semblance of adult defiance.

'I'm serious,' he growled, his voice a low rumble.

'So am I. I told you, it doesn't matter what you are. It's too late.'

His voice whipped out, low and harsh.
'Never say that.'

I bit my lip and was glad he couldn't know how much that hurt, the sharp sting of his words. I stared out at the road. We must be close now. He was driving much too fast, a silver blur against the dark.

'What are you thinking?' he asked, his voice still raw, strained. I just shook my head, not sure if I could speak. I could feel his gaze on my face, but I kept my eyes forward, fixed on the blurring road.

'Are you crying?' He sounded appalled, a note of genuine distress. I hadn't realized the

moisture in my eyes had brimmed over. I quickly rubbed my hand across my cheek, and sure enough, traitor tears were there, betraying me, a visible sign of my turmoil.

'No,' I said, but my voice cracked, a fragile sound.

I saw him reach toward me hesitantly with his right hand, but then he stopped and placed it slowly back on the steering wheel, a subtle, almost painful restraint.

'I'm sorry.' His voice burned with regret, a profound sorrow. I knew he wasn't just apologizing for the words that had upset me, but for something far deeper, something inherent to his existence.

The darkness slipped by us in silence, the only sound the hum of the engine and the drumming of my own heart.

'Tell me something,' he asked after another minute, and I could hear him struggle to use a lighter tone, to break the heavy silence.

'Yes?'

'What were you thinking tonight, just before I came around the corner? I couldn't understand your expression - you didn't look that scared, you looked like you were concentrating very hard on something.'

'I was trying to remember how to incapacitate an attacker - you know, self-defense. I was going to smash his nose into his

brain.' I thought of the dark-haired man with a surge of hate, a fierce, protective instinct.

'You were going to fight them?' This upset him. 'Didn't you think about running?'

'I fall down a lot when I run,' I admitted, a wry, self-deprecating humor.

'What about screaming for help?'

'I was getting to that part.'

He shook his head. 'You were right - I'm definitely fighting fate trying to keep you alive.'

I sighed. We were slowing, passing into the boundaries of Rockville. It had taken less than twenty minutes, the impossible journey compressed into a fleeting moment.

'Will I see you tomorrow?' I demanded, my voice urgent.

'Yes - I have a paper due, too.' He smiled, a faint, almost tender curve of his lips. 'I'll save you a seat at lunch.'

It was silly, after everything we'd been through tonight, how that little promise sent flutters through my stomach, a dizzying sensation, and made me unable to speak, my voice caught in my throat.

We were in front of Marcellus's house. The lights were on, my truck in its place, everything utterly normal. It was like waking from a dream, the surreal events of the night fading into the familiar. He stopped the car, but I didn't move, reluctant to break the spell.

'Do you promise to be there tomorrow?'

'I promise.'

I considered that for a moment, then nodded. I pulled his jacket off, taking one last whiff, inhaling the exquisite scent.

'You can keep it - you don't have a jacket for tomorrow,' he reminded me.

I handed it back to him. 'I don't want to have to explain to Marcellus.'

'Oh, right.' He grinned, a knowing amusement.

I hesitated, my hand on the door handle, trying to prolong the moment, to savor the last seconds.

'Naddalin?' he asked in a different tone – serious, but hesitant, a subtle shift.

'Yes?' I turned back to him too eagerly, my gaze fixed on his face.

'Will you promise me something?'

'Yes,' I said, and instantly regretted my unconditional agreement. What if he asked me to stay away from him? I couldn't keep that promise.

'Don't go into the woods alone.'

I stared at him in blank confusion. 'Why?'

He frowned, and his eyes were tight as he stared past me out the window, a sudden, chilling bleakness.

'I'm not always the most dangerous thing out there. Let's leave it at that.'

I shuddered slightly at the sudden bleakness in his voice, but I was relieved. This, at least, was an easy promise to honor.

'Whatever you say.'

'I'll see you tomorrow,' he sighed, and I knew he wanted me to leave now, to break the fragile connection.

'Tomorrow, then.' I opened the door unwillingly, a profound reluctance.

'Naddalin?' I turned and he was leaning toward me, his pale, glorious face just inches from mine. My heart stopped beating, suspended in the terrifying, beautiful moment.

'Sleep well,' he said. His breath blew in my face, stunning me. It was the same exquisite scent that clung to his jacket, but in a more concentrated form. I blinked, thoroughly dazed. He leaned away.

I was unable to move until my brain had somewhat unscrambled itself. Then I stepped out of the car awkwardly, having to use the frame for support. I thought I heard him chuckle, but the sound was too quiet for me to be certain.

He waited till I had stumbled to the front door, and then I heard his engine quietly rev. I turned to watch the silver car disappear around the corner. I realized it was very cold.

I reached for the key mechanically,
unlocked the door, and stepped inside.

Marcellus called from the living room.
'Naddalin?'

'Yeah, Dad, it's me.' I walked in to see him.
He was watching a baseball game.

'You're home early.'

'Am I?' I was surprised.

'It's not even eight yet,' he told me. 'Did
you girls have fun?'

'Yeah - it was lots of fun.' My head was
spinning as I tried to remember all the way
back to the girls' night out I had planned.
'They both found dresses.'

'Are you all right?'

'I'm just tired. I did a lot of walking.'

'Well, maybe you should go lie down.' He sounded concerned. I wondered what my face looked like.

'I'm just going to call Selene first.'

'Weren't you just with her?' he asked, surprised.

'Yes – but I left my jacket in her car. I want to make sure she brings it tomorrow.'

'Well, give her a chance to get home first.'

'Right,' I agreed.

I went to the kitchen and fell, exhausted, into a chair. I was really feeling dizzy now. I

wondered if I was going to go into shock after all. Get a grip, I told myself.

The phone rang suddenly, startling me. I yanked it off the hook.

'Hello?' I asked breathlessly.

'Naddalin?'

'Hey, Selene, I was just going to call you.'

'You made it home?' Her voice was relieved... and surprised.

'Yes. I left my jacket in your car – could you bring it to me tomorrow?'

'Sure. But tell me what happened!' she demanded.

'Um, tomorrow – in Trig, okay?'

She caught on quickly. 'Oh, is your dad there?'

'Yes, that's right.'

'Okay, I'll talk to you tomorrow, then. Bye!'

I could hear the impatience in her voice.

'Bye, Selene.'

I walked up the stairs slowly, a heavy stupor clouding my mind. I went through the motions of getting ready for bed without paying any attention to what I was doing. It wasn't until I was in the shower – the water too hot, burning my skin – that I realized I was freezing. I shuddered violently for several minutes before the steaming spray could finally relax my rigid muscles. Then I stood in

the shower, too tired to move, until the hot water began to run out.

I stumbled out, wrapping myself securely in a towel, trying to hold the heat from the water in so the aching shivers wouldn't return. I dressed for bed swiftly and climbed under my quilt, curling into a ball, hugging myself to keep warm. A few small shudders trembled through me.

My mind still swirled dizzily, full of images I couldn't understand, and some I fought to repress. Nothing seemed clear at first, but as I fell gradually closer to unconsciousness, a few certainties became evident.

About three things I was absolutely positive. First, Eryndor was a vampire.

Second, there was part of him – and I didn't know how potent that part might be – that thirsted for my blood. And third, I was unconditionally and irrevocably in love with him.

Interrogations...

It was very hard, in the morning, to argue with the part of me that was sure last night was a dream. Logic wasn't on my side, nor common sense. I clung to the parts I couldn't have imagined – like his scent. I was sure I could never have dreamed that up on my own, that exquisite, impossible fragrance.

It was foggy and dark outside my window, absolutely perfect. He had no reason not to be in school today. I dressed in my heavy clothes,

remembering I didn't have a jacket. Further proof that my memory was real, a tangible anchor in the swirling unreality.

When I got downstairs, Marcellus was gone again – I was running later than I'd realized. I swallowed a granola bar in three bites, chased it down with milk straight from the carton, and then hurried out the door. Hopefully, the rain would hold off until I could find Selene.

It was unusually foggy; the air was almost smoky with it, thick and clinging. The mist was ice cold where it clung to the exposed skin on my face and neck. I couldn't wait to get the heater going in my truck. It was such a thick fog that I was a few feet down the driveway before I realized there was a car in it: a silver

car, gleaming faintly through the haze. My heart thudded, stuttered, and then picked up again in double time, a frantic rhythm against my ribs.

I didn't see where he came from, but suddenly he was there, pulling the door open for me, a silent, impossible apparition.

'Do you want to ride with me today?' he asked, amused by my expression as he caught me by surprise yet again. There was uncertainty in his voice, a faint hesitation. He was really giving me a choice – I was free to refuse, and part of him hoped for that. It was a vain hope.

'Yes, thank you,' I said, trying to keep my voice calm, steady. As I stepped into the warm

car, I noticed his tan jacket was slung over the headrest of the passenger seat. The door closed behind me, and, sooner than should be possible, he was sitting next to me, starting the car, its engine purring to life.

'I brought the jacket for you. I didn't want you to get sick or something.' His voice was guarded, a subtle concern. I noticed that he wore no jacket himself, just a light gray knit V-neck shirt with long sleeves. Again, the fabric clung to his perfectly muscled chest. It was a colossal tribute to his face that it kept my eyes away from his body, his mesmerizing features a powerful distraction.

'I'm not quite that delicate,' I said, but I pulled the jacket onto my lap, pushing my arms through the too-long sleeves, curious to

see if the scent could possibly be as good as I remembered. It was better, an intoxicating aroma that filled my senses.

'Aren't you?' he contradicted in a voice so low I wasn't sure if he meant for me to hear, a subtle challenge.

We drove through the fog-shrouded streets, always too fast, feeling awkward. I was, at least. Last night all the walls were down... almost all.

I didn't know if we were still being as candid today. It left me tongue-tied. I waited for him to speak.

He turned to smirk at me. 'What, no twenty questions today?'

'Do my questions bother you?' I asked, relieved, the tension easing slightly.

'Not as much as your reactions do.' He looked like he was joking, but I couldn't be sure, his expression enigmatic.

I frowned. 'Do I react badly?'

'No, that's the problem. You take everything so coolly – it's unnatural. It makes me wonder what you're really thinking.'

'I always tell you what I'm really thinking.'

'You edit,' he accused, a knowing glint in his eyes.

'Not very much.'

'Enough to drive me insane.'

'You don't want to hear it,' I mumbled, almost whispered. As soon as the words were out, I regretted them. The pain in my voice was very faint; I could only hope he hadn't noticed it.

He didn't respond, and I wondered if I had ruined the mood. His face was unreadable as we drove into the school parking lot. Something occurred to me belatedly.

'Where's the rest of your family?' I asked – more than glad to be alone with him, but remembering that his car was usually full.

'They took Lysandra's car.' He shrugged as he parked next to a glossy red convertible with the top up. 'Ostentatious, isn't it?'

'Um, wow,' I breathed. 'If she has that, why does she ride with you?'

'Like I said, it's ostentatious. We try to blend in.'

'You don't succeed.' I laughed and shook my head as we got out of the car. I wasn't late anymore; his lunatic driving had gotten me to school in plenty of time. 'So why did Lysandra drive today if it's more conspicuous?'

'Hadn't you noticed? I'm breaking all the rules now.' He met me at the front of the car, staying very close to my side as we walked onto campus. I wanted to close that little distance, to reach out and touch him, but I was afraid he wouldn't like me to.

'Why do you have cars like that at all?' I wondered aloud. 'If you're looking for privacy?'

'An indulgence,' he admitted with an impish smile. 'We all like to drive fast.'

'Figures,' I muttered under my breath, a wry comment.

Under the shelter of the cafeteria roof's overhang, Selene was waiting, her eyes about to bug out of their sockets, wide with anticipation. Over her arm, bless her, was my jacket.

'Hey, Selene,' I said when we were a few feet away. 'Thanks for remembering.' She handed me my jacket without speaking, her gaze darting between us.

'Good morning, Selene,' Eryndor said politely. It wasn't really his fault that his voice was so irresistible. Or what his eyes were capable of.

'Er... hi.' She shifted her wide eyes to me, trying to gather her jumbled thoughts. 'I guess I'll see you in Trig.' She gave me a meaningful look, and I suppressed a sigh. What on earth was I going to tell her?

'Yeah, I'll see you then.'

She walked away, pausing twice to peek back over her shoulder at us, her curiosity palpable.

'What are you going to tell her?' Eryndor murmured.

'Hey, I thought you couldn't read my mind!' I hissed, a sudden indignation.

'I can't,' he said, startled. Then understanding brightened his eyes. 'However, I can read hers - she'll be waiting to ambush you in class.'

I groaned as I pulled off his jacket and handed it to him, replacing it with my own. He folded it over his arm.

'So what are you going to tell her?'

'A little help?' I pleaded. 'What does she want to know?'

He shook his head, grinning wickedly. 'That's not fair.'

'No, you not sharing what you know - now that's not fair.'

He deliberated for a moment as we walked. We stopped outside the door to my first class.

'She wants to know if we're secretly dating. And she wants to know how you feel about me,' he finally said.

'Yikes. What should I say?' I tried to keep my expression very innocent. People were passing us on their way to class, probably staring, but I was barely aware of them, my focus entirely on him.

'Hmmm.' He paused to catch a stray lock of hair that was escaping the twist on my neck and wound it back into place, his fingers

brushing my skin. My heart spluttered hyperactively. 'I suppose you could say yes to the first... if you don't mind – it's easier than any other explanation.'

'I don't mind,' I said in a faint voice, a breathless whisper.

'And as for her other question... well, I'll be listening to hear the answer to that one myself.' One side of his mouth pulled up into my favorite uneven smile. I couldn't catch my breath soon enough to respond to that remark. He turned and walked away.

'I'll see you at lunch,' he called over his shoulder. Three people walking in the door stopped to stare at me.

I hurried into class, flushed and irritated. He was such a cheater. Now I was even more worried about what I was going to say to Selene. I sat in my usual seat, slamming my bag down in aggravation.

'Morning, Kaelen,' Kaelen said from the seat next to me. I looked up to see an odd, almost resigned look on his face. 'How was Port Angeles?'

'It was...' There was no honest way to sum it up. 'Great,' I finished lamely. 'Selene got a really cute dress.'

'Did she say anything about Monday night?' he asked, his eyes brightening. I smiled at the turn the conversation had taken.

'She said she had a really good time,' I assured him.

'She did?' he said eagerly.

'Most definitely.'

Professor Mason called the class to order then, asking us to turn in our papers. English and then Government passed in a blur, while I worried about how to explain things to Selene and agonized over whether Eryndor would really be listening to what I said through the medium of Selene's thoughts. How very inconvenient his little talent could be – when it wasn't saving my life.

The fog had almost dissolved by the end of the second hour, but the day was still dark

with low, oppressing clouds. I smiled up at the sky.

Eryndor was right, of course. When I walked into Trig Selene was sitting in the back row, nearly bouncing off her seat in agitation. I reluctantly went to sit by her, trying to convince myself it would be better to get it over with as soon as possible.

'Tell me everything!' she commanded before I was in the seat.

'What do you want to know?' I hedged.

'What happened last night?'

'He bought me dinner, and then he drove me home.'

She glared at me, her expression stiff with skepticism. 'How did you get home so fast?'

'He drives like a maniac. It was terrifying.'

I hoped he heard that.

'Was it like a date – did you tell him to meet you there?'

I hadn't thought of that. 'No – I was very surprised to see him there.'

Her lips puckered in disappointment at the transparent honesty in my voice.

'But he picked you up for school today?'

she probed.

'Yes – that was a surprise, too. He noticed I didn't have a jacket last night,' I explained.

'So are you going out again?'

'He offered to drive me to Seattle Saturday because he thinks my truck isn't up to it - does that count?'

'Yes.' She nodded.

'Well, then, yes.'

'W-o-w.' She exaggerated the word into three syllables. 'Eryndor Ainsley.'

'I know,' I agreed. 'Wow' didn't even cover it.

'Wait!' Her hands flew up, palms toward me like she was stopping traffic. 'Has he kissed you?'

'No,' I mumbled. 'It's not like that.'

She looked disappointed. I'm sure I did, too.

'Do you think Saturday... ?' She raised her eyebrows.

'I really doubt it.' The discontent in my voice was poorly disguised.

'What did you talk about?' She pushed for more information in a whisper. Class had started but Professor Varek wasn't paying close attention and we weren't the only ones still talking.

'I don't know, Selene, lots of stuff,' I whispered back. 'We talked about the English essay a little.' A very, very little. I think he mentioned it in passing.

'Please, Naddalin,' she begged. 'Give me some details.'

'Well... okay, I's got one. You should have seen the waitress flirting with him - it was over the top. But he didn't pay any attention to her at all.' Let him make what he could of that.

'That's a good sign,' she nodded. 'Was she pretty?'

'Very - and probably nineteen or twenty.'

'Even better. He must like you.'

'I think so, but it's hard to tell. He's always so cryptic,' I threw in for his benefit, sighing.

'I don't know how you're brave enough to be alone with him,' she breathed.

'Why?' I was shocked, but she didn't understand my reaction.

'He's so... intimidating. I wouldn't know what to say to him.' She made a face, probably remembering this morning or last night, when he'd turned the overwhelming force of his eyes on her.

'I do have some trouble with incoherency when I'm around him,' I admitted.

'Oh well. He is unbelievably gorgeous.'
Selene shrugged as if this excused any flaws. Which, in her book, it probably did.

'There's a lot more to him than that.'

'Really? Like what?'

I wished I had let it go. Almost as much as I was hoping he'd been kidding about listening in.

'I can't explain it right... but he's even more unbelievable behind the face.' The vampire who wanted to be good – who ran around saving people's lives so he wouldn't be a monster... I stared toward the front of the room.

'Is that possible?' She giggled.

I ignored her, trying to look like I was paying attention to Professor Varek.

'So you like him, then?' She wasn't about to give up.

'Yes,' I said curtly.

'I mean, do you really like him?' she urged.

'Yes,' I said again, blushing. I hoped that detail wouldn't register in her thoughts.

She'd had enough with the single syllable answers. 'How much do you like him?'

'Too much,' I whispered back. 'More than he likes me. But I don't see how I can help that.' I sighed, one blush blending into the next.

Then, thankfully, Professor Varek called on Selene for an answer.

She didn't get a chance to start on the subject again during class, and as soon as the bell rang, I took evasive action.

'In English, Kaelen asked me if you said anything about Monday night,' I told her.

'You're kidding! What did you say?!' she gasped, completely sidetracked.

'I told him you said you had a lot of fun - he looked pleased.'

'Tell me exactly what he said, and your exact answer!'

We spent the rest of the walk dissecting sentence structures and most of Spanish on a minute description of Kaelen's facial expressions. I wouldn't have helped draw it out for as long as I did if I wasn't worried about the subject returning to me.

And then the bell rang for lunch. As I jumped up out of my seat, shoving my books roughly in my bag, my uplifted expression must have tipped Selene off.

'You're not sitting with us today, are you?' she guessed.

'I don't think so.' I couldn't be sure that he wouldn't disappear inconveniently again.

But outside the door to our Spanish class, leaning against the wall – looking more like a Greek god than anyone had a right to – Eryndor was waiting for me. Selene took one look, rolled her eyes, and departed.

'See you later, Naddalin.' Her voice was thick with implications. I might have to turn off the ringer on the phone.

'Hello.' His voice was amused and irritated at the same time. He had been listening, it was obvious.

'Hi.'

I couldn't think of anything else to say, and he didn't speak – biding his time, I presumed – so it was a quiet walk to the cafeteria. Walking with Eryndor through the crowded lunchtime rush was a lot like my first day here; everyone stared.

He led the way into the line, still not speaking, though his eyes returned to my face every few seconds, their expression speculative. It seemed to me that irritation was winning out over amusement as the

dominant emotion in his face. I fidgeted nervously with the zipper on my jacket.

He stepped up to the counter and filled a tray with food.

'What are you doing?' I objected. 'You're not getting all that for me?'

He shook his head, stepping forward to buy the food.

'Half is for me, of course.'

I raised one eyebrow.

He led the way to the same place we'd sat that one time before. From the other end of the long table, a group of seniors gazed at us in amazement as we sat across from each other. Eryndor seemed oblivious.

'Take whatever you want,' he said, pushing the tray toward me.

'I'm curious,' I said as I picked up an apple, turning it around in my hands, 'what would you do if someone dared you to eat food?'

'You're always curious.' He grimaced, shaking his head. He glared at me, holding my eyes as he lifted the slice of pizza off the tray, and deliberately bit off a mouthful, chewed quickly, and then swallowed. I watched, eyes wide.

'If someone dared you to eat dirt, you could, couldn't you?' he asked condescendingly.

I wrinkled my nose. 'I did once... on a dare,' I admitted. 'It wasn't so bad.'

He laughed. 'I suppose I'm not surprised.' Something over my shoulder seemed to catch his attention.

'Selene's analyzing everything I do - she'll break it down for you later.' He pushed the rest of the pizza toward me. The mention of Selene brought a hint of his former irritation back to his features.

I put down the apple and took a bite of the pizza, looking away, knowing he was about to start.

'So the waitress was pretty, was she?' he asked casually.

'You really didn't notice?'

'No. I wasn't paying attention. I had a lot on my mind.'

'Poor girl.' I could afford to be generous now.

'Something you said to Selene... well, it bothers me.' He refused to be distracted. His voice was husky, and he glanced up from under his lashes with troubled eyes.

'I'm not surprised you heard something you didn't like. You know what they say about eavesdroppers,' I reminded him.

'I warned you I would be listening.'

'And I warned you that you didn't want to know everything I was thinking.'

'You did,' he agreed, but his voice was still rough. 'You aren't precisely right, though. I do want to know what you're thinking - everything. I just wish... that you wouldn't be thinking some things.'

I scowled. 'That's quite a distinction.'

'But that's not really the point at the moment.'

'Then what is?' We were inclined toward each other across the table now. He had his large white hands folded under his chin; I leaned forward, my right hand cupped around my neck. I had to remind myself that we were in a crowded lunchroom, with probably many curious eyes on us. It was too easy to get

wrapped up in our own private, tense little bubble.

'Do you truly believe that you care more for me than I do for you?' he murmured, leaning closer to me as he spoke, his dark golden eyes piercing.

I tried to remember how to exhale. I had to look away before it came back to me.

'You're doing it again,' I muttered.

His eyes opened wide with surprise.
'What?'

'Dazzling me,' I admitted, trying to concentrate as I looked back at him.

'Oh.' He frowned.

'It's not your fault,' I sighed. 'You can't help it.'

'Are you going to answer the question?'

I looked down. 'Yes.'

'Yes, you are going to answer, or yes, you really think that?' He was irritated again.

'Yes, I really think that.' I kept my eyes down on the table, my eyes tracing the pattern of the faux wood grains printed on the laminate. The silence dragged on. I stubbornly refused to be the first to break it this time, fighting hard against the temptation to peek at his expression.

Finally, he spoke, voice velvet soft. 'You're wrong.'

I glanced up to see that his eyes were gentle.

'You can't know that,' I disagreed in a whisper. I shook my head in doubt, though my heart throbbed at his words and I wanted so badly to believe them.

'What makes you think so?' His liquid topaz eyes were penetrating – trying futilely, I assumed, to lift the truth straight from my mind.

I stared back, struggling to think clearly in spite of his face, to find some way to explain. As I searched for the words, I could see him getting impatient; frustrated by my silence, he started to scowl. I lifted my hand from my neck, and held up one finger.

'Let me think,' I insisted. His expression cleared, now that he was satisfied that I was planning to answer. I dropped my hand to the table, moving my left hand so that my palms were pressed together. I stared at my hands, twisting and untwisting my fingers, as I finally spoke.

'Well, aside from the obvious, sometimes...' I hesitated. 'I can't be sure - I don't know how to read minds - but sometimes it seems like you're trying to say goodbye when you're saying something else.' That was the best I could sum up the sensation of anguish that his words triggered in me at times.

'Perceptive,' he whispered. And there was the anguish again, surfacing as he confirmed

my fear. 'That's exactly why you're wrong, though,' he began to explain, but then his eyes narrowed. 'What do you mean, 'the obvious'?'

'Well, look at me,' I said, unnecessarily as he was already staring. 'I'm absolutely ordinary - well, except for bad things like all the near-death experiences and being so clumsy that I'm almost disabled. And look at you.' I waved my hand toward him and all his bewildering perfection.

His brow creased angrily for a moment, then smoothed as his eyes took on a knowing look. 'You don't see yourself very clearly, you know. I'll admit you're dead-on about the bad things,' he chuckled blackly, 'but you didn't hear what every human male in this school was thinking on your first day.'

I blinked, astonished. 'I don't believe it...' I mumbled to myself.

'Trust me just this once - you are the opposite of ordinary.'

My embarrassment was much stronger than my pleasure at the look that came into his eyes when he said this. I quickly reminded him of my original argument.

'But I'm not saying goodbye,' I pointed out.

'Don't you see? That's what proves me right. I care the most, because if I can do it' - he shook his head, seeming to struggle with the thought - 'if leaving is the right thing to do, then I'll hurt myself to keep from hurting you, to keep you safe.'

I glared. 'And you don't think I would do the same?'

'You'd never have to make the choice.'

Abruptly, his unpredictable mood shifted again; a mischievous, devastating smile rearranged his features. 'Of course, keeping you safe is beginning to feel like a full-time occupation that requires my constant presence.'

'No one has tried to do away with me today,' I reminded him, grateful for the lighter subject. I didn't want him to talk about goodbyes anymore. If I had to, I supposed I could purposefully put myself in danger to keep him close... I banished that thought

before his quick eyes read it on my face. That idea would definitely get me in trouble.

'Yet,' he added.

'Yet,' I agreed; I would have argued, but now I wanted him to be expecting disasters.

'I have another question for you.' His face was still casual.

'Shoot.'

'Do you really need to go to Seattle this Saturday, or was that just an excuse to get out of saying no to all your admirers?'

I made a face at the memory. 'You know, I haven't forgiven you for the Tyler thing yet,' I warned him. 'It's your fault that he's deluded

himself into thinking I'm going to prom with him.'

'Oh, he would have found a chance to ask you without me – I just really wanted to watch your face,' he chuckled, I would have been angrier if his laughter wasn't so fascinating. 'If I'd asked you, would you have turned me down?' he asked, still laughing to himself.

'Probably not,' I admitted. 'But I would have canceled later – faked an illness or a sprained ankle.'

He was puzzled. 'Why would you do that?'

I shook my head sadly. 'You've never seen me in Gym, I guess, but I would have thought you would understand.'

'Are you referring to the fact that you can't walk across a flat, stable surface without finding something to trip over?'

'Obviously.'

'That wouldn't be a problem.' He was very confident. 'It's all in the leading.' He could see that I was about to protest, and he cut me off. 'But you never told me – are you resolved on going to Seattle, or do you mind if we do something different?'

As long as the 'we' part was in, I didn't care about anything else.

'I'm open to alternatives,' I allowed. 'But I do have a favor to ask.'

He looked wary, as he always did when I asked an open-ended question. 'What?'

'Can I drive?'

He frowned. 'Why?'

'Well, mostly because when I told Marcellus I was going to Seattle, he specifically asked if I was going alone and, at the time, I was. If he asked again, I probably wouldn't lie, but I don't think he will ask again, and leaving my truck at home would just bring up the subject unnecessarily. And also, because your driving frightens me.'

He rolled his eyes. 'Of all the things about me that could frighten you, you worry about my driving.' He shook his head in disgust, but then his eyes were serious again. 'Won't you

want to tell your father that you're spending the day with me?' There was an undercurrent to his question that I didn't understand.

'With Marcellus, less is always more.' I was definite about that. 'Where are we going, anyway?'

'The weather will be nice, so I'll be staying out of the public eye... and you can stay with me, if you'd like to.' Again, he was leaving the choice up to me.

'And you'll show me what you meant, about the sun?' I asked, excited by the idea of unraveling another of the unknowns.

'Yes.' He smiled, and then paused. 'But if you don't want to be... alone with me, I'd still rather you didn't go to Seattle by yourself. I

shudder to think of the trouble you could find in a city that size.'

I was miffed. 'Western PA is three times bigger than Seattle - just in population. In physical size -'

'But apparently,' he interrupted me, 'your number wasn't up in Western PA. So I'd rather you stayed near me.' His eyes did that unfair smoldering thing again.

I couldn't argue, with the eyes or the motivation, and it was a moot point anyway. 'As it happens, I don't mind being alone with you.'

'I know,' he sighed, brooding. 'You should tell Marcellus, though.'

'Why in the world would I do that?'

His eyes were suddenly fierce. 'To give me some small incentive to bring you back.'

I gulped. But, after a moment of thought, I was sure. 'I think I'll take my chances.'

He exhaled angrily, and looked away.

'Let's talk about something else,' I suggested.

'What do you want to talk about?' he asked. He was still annoyed.

I glanced around us, making sure we were well out of anyone's hearing. As I cast my eyes around the room, I caught the eyes of his sister, Aura, staring at me. The others were looking at Eryndor. I looked away swiftly, back

to him, and I asked the first thing that came to mind.

'Why did you go to that Goat Rocks place last weekend... to hunt? Marcellus said it wasn't a good place to hike, because of bears.'

He stared at me as if I was missing something very obvious.

'Bears?' I gasped, and he smirked. 'You know, bears are not in season,' I added sternly, to hide my shock.

'If you read carefully, the laws only cover hunting with weapons,' he informed me.

He watched my face with enjoyment as that slowly sank in.

'Bears?' I repeated with difficulty.

'Grizzly is Darius's favorite.' His voice was still offhand, but his eyes were scrutinizing my reaction. I tried to pull myself together.

'Hmmm,' I said, taking another bite of pizza as an excuse to look down. I chewed slowly, and then took a long drink of pop without looking up.

'So,' I said after a moment, finally meeting his now-anxious gaze. 'What's your favorite?'

He raised an eyebrow and the corners of his mouth turned down in disapproval.

'Mountain lion.'

'Ah,' I said in a politely disinterested tone, looking for my pop again.

'Of course,' he said, and his tone mirrored mine, 'we have to be careful not to impact the environment with injudicious hunting. We try to focus on areas with an overpopulation of predators – ranging as far away as we need. There's always plenty of deer and elk here, and they'll do, but where's the fun in that?' He smiled teasingly.

'Where indeed,' I murmured around another bite of pizza.

'Early spring is Darius's favorite bear season – they're just coming out of hibernation, so they're more irritable.' He smiled at some remembered joke.

'Nothing more fun than an irritated grizzly bear,' I agreed, nodding.

He snickered, shaking his head. 'Tell me what you're really thinking, please.'

'I'm trying to picture it - but I can't,' I admitted. 'How do you hunt a bear without weapons?'

'Oh, we have weapons.' He flashed his bright teeth in a brief, threatening smile. I fought back a shiver before it could expose me. 'Just not the kind they consider when writing hunting laws. If you've ever seen a bear attack on television, you should be able to visualize Darius hunting.'

I couldn't stop the next shiver that flashed down my spine. I peeked across the cafeteria toward Darius, grateful that he wasn't looking my way. The thick bands of muscle that

wrapped his arms and torso were somehow even more menacing now.

Eryndor followed my gaze and chuckled. I stared at him, unnerved.

'Are you like a bear, too?' I asked in a low voice.

'More like the lion, or so they tell me,' he said lightly. 'Perhaps our preferences are indicative.'

I tried to smile. 'Perhaps,' I repeated. But my mind was filled with opposing images that I couldn't merge together. 'Is that something I might get to see?'

'Absolutely not!' His face turned even whiter than usual, and his eyes were suddenly

furious. I leaned back, stunned and – though I'd never admit it to him – frightened by his reaction. He leaned back as well, folding his arms across his chest.

'Too scary for me?' I asked when I could control my voice again.

'If that were it, I would take you out tonight,' he said, his voice cutting. 'You need a healthy dose of fear. Nothing could be more beneficial for you.'

'Then why?' I pressed, trying to ignore his angry expression.

He glared at me for a long minute.

'Later,' he finally said. He was on his feet in one lithe movement. 'We're going to be late.'

I glanced around, startled to see that he was right and the cafeteria was nearly vacant. When I was with him, the time and the place were such a muddled blur that I completely lost track of both. I jumped up, grabbing my bag from the back of my chair.

'Later, then,' I agreed. I wouldn't forget.

The bell for the next class rang, a jarring sound that pulled me from my intense conversation with Eryndor. I walked to my next class, my mind still replaying his words, the unsettling revelations about his family's hunting habits. The image of Darius wrestling

a grizzly bear, the sheer, impossible brutality of it, sent shivers down my spine. It was a world so far removed from my own, yet I was inexplicably drawn into its dangerous orbit.

The rest of the school day passed in a haze. I tried to focus on my classes, but my thoughts kept drifting back to Eryndor, to his golden eyes, to the chilling truth he had unveiled. Every mundane detail of school life seemed dull and insignificant in comparison to the extraordinary reality that now encompassed me.

When the final bell rang, I practically sprinted to my truck, eager to escape the confines of the school and the lingering presence of my overwhelming thoughts. The drive home was a blur of rain and

introspection. I replayed every word of our conversation, every nuance, every subtle shift in his expression. The fear was still there, a cold knot in my stomach, but it was intertwined with a strange, almost reckless fascination.

Back in my room, I pulled out my copy of the Nevaeh Saga. The ancient text, once a source of comforting escapism, now felt like a terrifying instruction manual. I flipped through its brittle pages, searching for any mention of 'mountain lions' or 'bears' in relation to the 'cold ones.' The more I read, the more the lines between myth and reality blurred. The Saga spoke of the 'Whisperers of the Wild,' beings who could commune with the primal forces of nature, drawing strength from the

untamed wilderness. It described their hunting rituals, their respect for the balance of the ecosystem, and their unique methods of sustenance that allowed them to live among humans without preying on them. It was a chillingly accurate depiction of Eryndor's family, a confirmation of his words. The Saga also hinted at a deeper, more ancient conflict, a war between the 'Whisperers' and other, darker entities that lurked in the shadows, preying on the weak. It was a world of hidden dangers, of ancient pacts and forbidden powers, and I, Naddalin, was now undeniably a part of it. The weight of this knowledge settled heavily on my shoulders, a profound, unsettling burden. I knew, with a chilling certainty, that my life in Rockville, in Western PA, would never be ordinary again.

Chapter Eleven: Complications

Everyone watched us as we walked together to our lab table. I noticed that he no longer angled the chair to sit as far from me as the desk would allow. Instead, he sat quite close beside me, our arms almost touching, a silent, intimate gesture that drew every eye.

Professor Thorne backed into the room then – what superb timing the man had – pulling a tall metal frame on wheels that held a heavy-looking, outdated omniscreen and chrono-recorder. A movie day – the lift in the class atmosphere was almost tangible, a collective sigh of relief.

Professor Thorne shoved the data-crystal into the reluctant chrono-recorder and walked to the wall to turn off the lights.

And then, as the room went black, plunged into a sudden, inky darkness, I was suddenly hyperaware that Eryndor was sitting less than an inch from me. I was stunned by the unexpected electricity that flowed through me, a current of raw energy, amazed that it was possible to be more aware of him than I already was. A crazy impulse to reach over and touch him, to stroke his perfect face just once in the darkness, to confirm his reality, nearly overwhelmed me. I crossed my arms tightly across my chest, my hands balling into fists, a desperate attempt at self-control. I was losing my mind.

The opening credits began, lighting the room by a token amount, a faint, flickering glow. My eyes, of their own accord, flickered to him, drawn by an irresistible force. I smiled sheepishly as I realized his posture was identical to mine, fists clenched under his arms, right down to the eyes, peering sideways at me. He grinned back, his eyes somehow managing to smolder, even in the dim light, a dangerous, captivating gleam. I looked away before I could start hyperventilating. It was absolutely ridiculous that I should feel dizzy, that his mere presence could steal my breath.

The hour seemed very long. I couldn't concentrate on the movie – I didn't even know what subject it was on, the images blurring

into an indistinct haze. I tried unsuccessfully to relax, but the electric current that seemed to be originating from somewhere in his body never slackened, a constant, unsettling hum. Occasionally I would permit myself a quick glance in his direction, but he never seemed to relax, either, his posture rigid, watchful. The overpowering craving to touch him also refused to fade, and I crushed my fists safely against my ribs until my fingers were aching with the effort, a silent battle.

I breathed a sigh of relief when Professor Thorne flicked the lights back on at the end of class, and stretched my arms out in front of me, flexing my stiff fingers, releasing the tension. Eryndor chuckled beside me, a low, resonant sound.

'Well, that was interesting,' he murmured. His voice was dark and his eyes were cautious, a hint of something unreadable.

'Umm,' was all I was able to respond, my voice a strangled sound.

'Shall we?' he asked, rising fluidly, a creature of effortless grace.

I almost groaned. Time for Gym. I stood with care, worried my balance might have been affected by the strange new intensity between us, the unsettling current that now flowed through my veins.

He walked me to my next class in silence and paused at the door; I turned to say goodbye. His face startled me - his expression was torn, almost pained, and so fiercely

beautiful that the ache to touch him flared as strong as before, a desperate, undeniable longing. My goodbye stuck in my throat, choked by the sudden, overwhelming emotion.

He raised his hand, hesitant, conflict raging in his eyes, and then swiftly brushed the length of my cheekbone with his fingertips. His skin was as icy as ever, but the trail his fingers left on my skin was alarmingly warm - like I'd been burned, but didn't feel the pain of it yet, a paradoxical sensation.

He turned without a word and strode quickly away from me, a silent, swift retreat.

I walked into the gym, lightheaded and wobbly, my mind still reeling. I drifted to the locker room, changing in a trancelike state,

only vaguely aware that there were other people surrounding me. Reality didn't fully set in until I was handed a racket. It wasn't heavy, yet it felt very unsafe in my hand, a clumsy, alien object. I could see a few of the other kids in class eyeing me furtively, a mixture of amusement and apprehension in their gazes. Coach Thorne ordered us to pair up into teams.

Mercifully, some vestiges of Kaelen's chivalry still survived; he came to stand beside me.

'Do you want to be a team?'

'Thanks, Kaelen - you don't have to do this, you know.' I grimaced apologetically, a

silent acknowledgment of my physical ineptitude.

'Don't worry, I'll keep out of your way.' He grinned. Sometimes it was so easy to like Kaelen, his simple, uncomplicated kindness.

It didn't go smoothly. I somehow managed to hit myself in the head with my racket and clip Kaelen's shoulder on the same swing. I spent the rest of the hour in the back corner of the court, the racket held safely behind my back, a self-imposed exile. Despite being handicapped by me, Kaelen was pretty good; he won three games out of four singlehandedly. He gave me an unearned high five when the coach finally blew the whistle ending class.

'So,' he said as we walked off the court.

'So what?'

'You and Eryndor, huh?' he asked, his tone rebellious, a hint of accusation. My previous feeling of affection disappeared, replaced by a surge of irritation.

'That's none of your business, Kaelen,' I warned, internally cursing Selene straight to the fiery pits of Hades, her gossiping a constant source of annoyance.

'I don't like it,' he muttered anyway, his voice low, sullen.

'You don't have to,' I snapped, my patience wearing thin.

'He looks at you like... like you're something to eat,' he continued, ignoring me, his gaze fixed on some distant point.

I choked back the hysteria that threatened to explode, but a small giggle managed to get out despite my efforts, a nervous, involuntary sound. He glowered at me. I waved and fled to the locker room.

I dressed quickly, something stronger than butterflies battering recklessly against the walls of my stomach, my argument with Kaelen already a distant memory. I was wondering if Eryndor would be waiting, or if I should meet him at his car. What if his family was there? I felt a wave of real terror. Did they know that I knew? Was I supposed to know

that they knew that I knew, or not? The layers of unspoken knowledge were suffocating.

By the time I walked out of the gym, I had just about decided to walk straight home without even looking toward the parking lot. But my worries were unnecessary. Eryndor was waiting, leaning casually against the side of the gym, his breathtaking face untroubled now, a serene mask. As I walked to his side, I felt a peculiar sense of release, a profound calm settling over me.

'Hi,' I breathed, smiling hugely, a genuine, unburdened expression.

'Hello.' His answering smile was brilliant, a dazzling flash of white. 'How was Gym?'

My face fell a tiny bit. 'Fine,' I lied, the word tasting like ash.

'Really?' He was unconvinced, a subtle skepticism in his voice. His eyes shifted their focus slightly, looking over my shoulder and narrowing. I glanced behind me to see Kaelen's back as he walked away, his shoulders slumped.

'What?' I demanded.

His eyes slid back to mine, still tight, a hint of irritation. 'Newton's getting on my nerves.'

'You weren't listening again?' I was horror-struck, a sudden, chilling realization. All traces of my sudden good humor vanished.

'How's your head?' he asked innocently, a faint amusement in his tone.

'You're unbelievable!' I turned, stomping away in the general direction of the parking lot, though I hadn't ruled out walking at this point, my anger a hot, useless thing.

He kept up with me easily, his movements impossibly silent.

'You were the one who mentioned how I'd never seen you in Gym – it made me curious.' He didn't sound repentant, so I ignored him, my jaw tight.

We walked in silence – a furious, embarrassed silence on my part – to his car. But I had to stop a few steps away – a crowd of people, all boys, were surrounding it.

Then I realized they weren't surrounding the Volvo, they were actually circled around Lysandra's red convertible, unmistakable lust in their eyes, their faces rapt. None of them even looked up as Eryndor slid between them to open his door. I climbed quickly in the passenger side, also unnoticed, a silent, fleeting presence.

'Ostentatious,' he muttered, a faint grimace.

'What kind of car is that?' I asked, my curiosity piqued.

'An M3.'

'I don't speak Car and Driver.'

'It's a BMW.' He rolled his eyes, not looking at me, trying to back out without running over the car enthusiasts.

I nodded – I'd heard of that one.

'Are you still angry?' he asked as he carefully maneuvered his way out.

'Definitely.'

He sighed. 'Will you forgive me if I apologize?'

'Maybe... if you mean it. And if you promise not to do it again,' I insisted, my voice firm.

His eyes were suddenly shrewd, a calculating glint. 'How about if I mean it, and I

agree to let you drive Saturday?' he countered my conditions, a tempting offer.

I considered, and decided it was probably the best offer I would get. 'Deal,' I agreed, a small smile touching my lips.

'Then I'm very sorry I upset you.' His eyes burned with sincerity for a protracted moment – playing havoc with the rhythm of my heart – and then turned playful. 'And I'll be on your doorstep bright and early Saturday morning.'

'Um, it doesn't help with the Marcellus situation if an unexplained Volvo is left in the driveway.'

His smile was condescending now. 'I wasn't intending to bring a car.'

'How -'

He cut me off. 'Don't worry about it. I'll be there, no car.'

I let it go. I had a more pressing question.

'Is it later yet?' I asked significantly, my gaze fixed on his face.

He frowned. 'I supposed it is later.'

I kept my expression polite as I waited.

He stopped the car. I looked up, surprised – of course we were already at Marcellus's house, parked behind the truck. It was easier to ride with him if I only looked when it was over. When I looked back at him, he was staring at me, measuring with his eyes, a silent assessment.

'And you still want to know why you can't see me hunt?' He seemed solemn, but I thought I saw a trace of humor deep in his eyes, a subtle amusement.

'Well,' I clarified, 'I was mostly wondering about your reaction.'

'Did I frighten you?' Yes, there was definitely humor there.

'No,' I lied. He didn't buy it.

'I apologize for scaring you,' he persisted with a slight smile, but then all evidence of teasing disappeared. 'It was just the very thought of you being there... while we hunted.' His jaw tightened, a sudden tension.

'That would be bad?'

He spoke from between clenched teeth.

'Extremely.'

'Because... ?'

He took a deep breath and stared through the windshield at the thick, rolling clouds that seemed to press down, almost within reach, a heavy, oppressive blanket.

'When we hunt,' he spoke slowly, unwillingly, 'we give ourselves over to our senses... govern less with our minds. Especially our sense of smell. If you were anywhere near me when I lost control that way...' He shook his head, still gazing morosely at the heavy clouds, a profound weariness in his posture.

I kept my expression firmly under control, expecting the swift flash of his eyes to judge my reaction that soon followed. My face gave nothing away.

But our eyes held, and the silence deepened - and changed. Flickers of the electricity I'd felt this afternoon began to charge the atmosphere as he gazed unrelentingly into my eyes. It wasn't until my head started to swim that I realized I wasn't breathing. When I drew in a jagged breath, breaking the stillness, he closed his eyes.

'Naddalin, I think you should go inside now.' His low voice was rough, his eyes on the clouds again.

I opened the door, and the arctic draft that burst into the car helped clear my head. Afraid I might stumble in my woozy state, I stepped carefully out of the car and shut the door behind me without looking back. The whirl of the automatic window unrolling made me turn.

'Oh, Naddalin?' he called after me, his voice more even. He leaned toward the open window with a faint smile on his lips.

'Yes?'

'Tomorrow it's my turn.'

'Your turn to what?'

He smiled wider, flashing his gleaming teeth. 'Ask the questions.'

And then he was gone, the car speeding down the street and disappearing around the corner before I could even collect my thoughts. I smiled as I walked to the house. It was clear he was planning to see me tomorrow, if nothing else.

That night Eryndor starred in my dreams, as usual. However, the climate of my unconsciousness had changed. It thrilled with the same electricity that had charged the afternoon, and I tossed and turned restlessly, waking often. It was only in the early hours of the morning that I finally sank into an exhausted, dreamless sleep.

When I woke I was still tired, but edgy as well. I pulled on my brown turtleneck and the inescapable jeans, sighing as I daydreamed of

spaghetti straps and shorts. Breakfast was the usual, quiet event I expected. Marcellus fried eggs for himself; I had my bowl of cereal. I wondered if he had forgotten about this Saturday. He answered my unspoken question as he stood up to take his plate to the sink.

'About this Saturday...' he began, walking across the kitchen and turning on the faucet.

I cringed. 'Yes, Dad?'

'Are you still set on going to Seattle?' he asked.

'That was the plan.' I grimaced, wishing he hadn't brought it up so I wouldn't have to compose careful half-truths.

He squeezed some dish soap onto his plate and swirled it around with the brush. 'And you're sure you can't make it back in time for the dance?'

'I'm not going to the dance, Dad.' I glared.

'Didn't anyone ask you?' he asked, trying to hide his concern by focusing on rinsing the plate.

I sidestepped the minefield. 'It's a girl's choice.'

'Oh.' He frowned as he dried his plate.

I sympathized with him. It must be a hard thing, to be a father; living in fear that your daughter would meet a boy she liked, but also having to worry if she didn't. How ghastly it

would be, I thought, shuddering, if Marcellus had even the slightest inkling of exactly what I did like.

Marcellus left then, with a goodbye wave, and I went upstairs to brush my teeth and gather my books. When I heard the cruiser pull away, I could only wait a few seconds before I had to peek out of my window. The silver car was already there, waiting in Marcellus's spot on the driveway. I bounded down the stairs and out the front door, wondering how long this bizarre routine would continue. I never wanted it to end.

He waited in the car, not appearing to watch as I shut the door behind me without bothering to lock the dead-bolt. I walked to the car, pausing shyly before opening the door and

stepping in. He was smiling, relaxed – and, as usual, perfect and beautiful to an excruciating degree.

'Good morning.' His voice was silky. 'How are you today?' His eyes roamed over my face, as if his question was something more than simple courtesy.

'Good, thank you.' I was always good – much more than good – when I was near him.

His gaze lingered on the circles under my eyes. 'You look tired.'

'I couldn't sleep,' I confessed, automatically swinging my hair around my shoulder to provide some measure of cover.

'Neither could I,' he teased as he started the engine. I was becoming used to the quiet purr. I was sure the roar of my truck would scare me, whenever I got to drive it again.

I laughed. 'I guess that's right. I suppose I slept just a little bit more than you did.'

'I'd wager you did.'

'So what did you do last night?' I asked.

He chuckled. 'Not a chance. It's my day to ask questions.'

'Oh, that's right. What do you want to know?' My forehead creased. I couldn't imagine anything about me that could be in any way interesting to him.

'What's your favorite color?' he asked, his face grave.

I rolled my eyes. 'It changes from day to day.'

'What's your favorite color today?' He was still solemn.

'Probably brown.' I tended to dress according to my mood.

He snorted, dropping his serious expression. 'Brown?' he asked skeptically.

'Sure. Brown is warm. I miss brown. Everything that's supposed to be brown – tree trunks, rocks, dirt – is all covered up with squashy green stuff here,' I complained.

He seemed fascinated by my little rant. He considered for a moment, staring into my eyes.

'You're right,' he decided, serious again. 'Brown is warm.' He reached over, swiftly, but somehow still hesitantly, to sweep my hair back behind my shoulder.

We were at the school by now. He turned back to me as he pulled into a parking space.

'What music is in your CD player right now?' he asked, his face as somber as if he'd asked for a murder confession.

I realized I'd never removed the CD Asher had given me. When I said the name of the band, he smiled crookedly, a peculiar expression in his eyes. He flipped open a compartment under his car's CD player, pulled

out one of thirty or so CDs that were jammed into the small space, and handed it to me,

'Debussy to this?' He raised an eyebrow.

It was the same CD. I examined the familiar cover art, keeping my eyes down.

It continued like that for the rest of the day. While he walked me to English, when he met me after Spanish, all through the lunch hour, he questioned me relentlessly about every insignificant detail of my existence. Movies I'd liked and hated, the few places I'd been and the many places I wanted to go, and books – endlessly books.

I couldn't remember the last time I'd talked so much. More often than not, I felt self-conscious, certain I must be boring him.

But the absolute absorption of his face, and his never-ending stream of questions, compelled me to continue. Mostly his questions were easy, only a very few triggering my easy blushes. But when I did flush, it brought on a whole new round of questions.

Such as the time he asked my favorite gemstone, and I blurted out topaz before thinking. He'd been flinging questions at me with such speed that I felt like I was taking one of those psychiatric tests where you answer with the first word that comes to mind. I was sure he would have continued down whatever mental list he was following, except for the blush. My face reddened because, until very recently, my favorite gemstone was garnet. It was impossible, while staring back

into his topaz eyes, not to remember the reason for the switch. And, naturally, he wouldn't rest until I'd admitted why I was embarrassed.

'Tell me,' he finally commanded after persuasion failed – failed only because I kept my eyes safely away from his face.

'It's the color of your eyes today,' I sighed, surrendering, staring down at my hands as I fiddled with a piece of my hair. 'I suppose if you asked me in two weeks I'd say onyx.' I'd given more information than necessary in my unwilling honesty, and I worried it would provoke the strange anger that flared whenever I slipped and revealed too clearly how obsessed I was.

But his pause was very short.

'What kinds of flowers do you prefer?' he fired off.

I sighed in relief, and continued with the psychoanalysis.

Biology was a complication again. Eryndor had continued with his quizzing up until Professor Thorne entered the room, dragging the audiovisual frame again. As the teacher approached the light switch, I noticed Eryndor slide his chair slightly farther away from mine. It didn't help. As soon as the room was dark, there was the same electric spark, the same restless craving to stretch my hand across the short space and touch his cold skin, as yesterday.

I leaned forward on the table, resting my chin on my folded arms, my hidden fingers gripping the table's edge as I fought to ignore the irrational longing that unsettled me. I didn't look at him, afraid that if he was looking at me, it would only make self-control that much harder. I sincerely tried to watch the movie, but at the end of the hour I had no idea what I'd just seen. I sighed in relief again when Professor Thorne turned the lights on, finally glancing at Eryndor; he was looking at me, his eyes ambivalent.

He rose in silence and then stood still, waiting for me. We walked toward the gym in silence, like yesterday. And, also like yesterday, he touched my face wordlessly – this time with the back of his cool hand,

stroking once from my temple to my jaw – before he turned and walked away.

Gym passed quickly as I watched Kaelen's one-man badminton show. He didn't speak to me today, either in response to my vacant expression or because he was still angry about our squabble yesterday. Somewhere, in a corner of my mind, I felt bad about that. But I couldn't concentrate on him.

I hurried to change afterward, ill at ease, knowing the faster I moved, the sooner I would be with Eryndor. The pressure made me more clumsy than usual, but eventually I made it out the door, feeling the same release when I saw him standing there, a wide smile automatically spreading across my face. He

smiled in reaction before launching into more cross-examination.

His questions were different now, though, not as easily answered. He wanted to know what I missed about home, insisting on descriptions of anything he wasn't familiar with. We sat in front of Marcellus's house for hours, as the sky darkened and rain plummeted around us in a sudden deluge.

I tried to describe impossible things like the scent of creosote – bitter, slightly resinous, but still pleasant – the high, keening sound of the cicadas in July, the feathery barrenness of the trees, the very size of the sky, extending white-blue from horizon to horizon, barely interrupted by the low mountains covered with purple volcanic rock. The hardest thing to

explain was why it was so beautiful to me – to justify a beauty that didn't depend on the sparse, spiny vegetation that often looked half dead, a beauty that had more to do with the exposed shape of the land, with the shallow bowls of valleys between the craggy hills, and the way they held on to the sun. I found myself using my hands as I tried to describe it to him.

His quiet, probing questions kept me talking freely, forgetting, in the dim light of the storm, to be embarrassed for monopolizing the conversation. Finally, when I had finished detailing my cluttered room at home, he paused instead of responding with another question.

'Are you finished?' I asked in relief.

'Not even close – but your father will be home soon.'

'Marcellus!' I suddenly recalled his existence, and sighed. I looked out at the rain-darkened sky, but it gave nothing away. 'How late is it?' I wondered out loud as I glanced at the clock. I was surprised by the time – Marcellus would be driving home now.

'It's twilight,' Eryndor murmured, looking at the western horizon, obscured as it was with clouds. His voice was thoughtful, as if his mind were somewhere far away. I stared at him as he gazed unseeingly out the windshield.

I was still staring when his eyes suddenly shifted back to mine.

'It's the safest time of day for us,' he said, answering the unspoken question in my eyes. 'The easiest time. But also the saddest, in a way... the end of another day, the return of the night. Darkness is so predictable, don't you think?' He smiled wistfully.

'I like the night. Without the dark, we'd never see the stars.' I frowned. 'Not that you see them here much.'

He laughed, and the mood abruptly lightened.

'Marcellus will be here in a few minutes. So, unless you want to tell him that you'll be with me Saturday...' He raised one eyebrow.

'Thanks, but no thanks.' I gathered my books, realizing I was stiff from sitting still so long. 'So is it my turn tomorrow, then?'

'Certainly not!' His face was teasingly outraged. 'I told you I wasn't done, didn't I?'

'What more is there?'

'You'll find out tomorrow.' He reached across to open my door for me, and his sudden proximity sent my heart into frenzied palpitations.

But his hand froze on the handle.

'Not good,' he muttered.

'What is it?' I was surprised to see that his jaw was clenched, his eyes disturbed.

He glanced at me for a brief second.

'Another complication,' he said glumly.

He flung the door open in one swift movement, and then moved, almost cringed, swiftly away from me.

The flash of headlights through the rain caught my attention as a dark car pulled up to the curb just a few feet away, facing us.

'Marcellus around the corner,' he warned, staring through the downpour at the other vehicle.

I hopped out at once, despite my confusion and curiosity. The rain was louder as it glanced off my jacket.

I tried to make out the shapes in the front seat of the other car, but it was too dark. I could see Eryndor illuminated in the glare of the new car's headlights; he was still staring ahead, his gaze locked on something or someone I couldn't see. His expression was a strange mix of frustration and defiance.

Then he revved the engine, and the tires squealed against the wet pavement. The Volvo was out of sight in seconds.

'Hey, Naddalin,' called a familiar, husky voice from the driver's side of the little black car.

'Nevaeh?' I asked, squinting through the rain. Just then, Marcellus's cruiser swung

around the corner, his lights shining on the occupants of the car in front of me.

Nevaeh was already climbing out, his wide grin visible even through the darkness. In the passenger seat was a much older man, a heavysset man with a memorable face - a face that overflowed, the cheeks resting against his shoulders, with creases running through the russet skin like an old leather jacket. And the surprisingly familiar eyes, black eyes that seemed at the same time both too young and too ancient for the broad face they were set in. Nevaeh's father, Marcus Black. I knew him immediately, though in the more than five years since I'd seen him last I'd managed to forget his name when Marcellus had spoken of him my first day here. He was staring at me,

scrutinizing my face, so I smiled tentatively at him. His eyes were wide, as if in shock or fear, his nostrils flared. My smile faded.

Another complication, Eryndor had said.

Marcus still stared at me with intense, anxious eyes. I groaned internally. Had Marcus recognized Eryndor so easily? Could he really believe the impossible legends his son had scoffed at?

The answer was clear in Marcus's eyes. Yes. Yes, he could.

The raw, primal fear emanating from Marcus was a tangible thing, a wave of cold dread that washed over me, chilling me to the bone. It was a fear that transcended the mundane, a fear rooted in ancient knowledge,

in the truths whispered in the Nevaeh Saga. His gaze, fixed on me, seemed to pierce through my own carefully constructed facade, as if he could see the impossible knowledge I now carried, the chilling secret of Eryndor's true nature. I felt a sudden, profound sense of exposure, as if the Veil, that delicate boundary between their world and mine, had thinned to transparency around me. The unspoken words hung heavy in the rain-soaked air: You know. And now, you are one of them, caught in their unseen current.

Chapter Twelve: Balancing

'Marcus!' Marcellus called as soon as he got out of the car.

I turned toward the house, beckoning to Nevaeh as I ducked under the porch. I heard Marcellus greeting them loudly behind me.

'I'm going to pretend I didn't see you behind the wheel, Nevaeh,' he said disapprovingly.

'We get permits early on the rez,' Nevaeh said while I unlocked the door and flicked on the porch light.

'Sure you do,' Marcellus laughed.

'I have to get around somehow.' I recognized Marcus's resonant voice easily, despite the years. The sound of it made me feel suddenly younger, a child again.

I went inside, leaving the door open behind me and turning on lights before I hung up my jacket. Then I stood in the door, watching anxiously as Marcellus and Nevaeh helped Marcus out of the car and into his wheelchair.

I backed out of the way as the three of them hurried in, shaking off the rain.

'This is a surprise,' Marcellus was saying.

'It's been too long,' Marcus answered. 'I hope it's not a bad time.' His dark eyes flashed up to me again, their expression unreadable, probing.

'No, it's great. I hope you can stay for the game.'

Nevaeh grinned. 'I think that's the plan – our omniscreen broke last week.'

Marcus made a face at his son. 'And, of course, Nevaeh was anxious to see Naddalin again,' he added. Nevaeh scowled and ducked his head while I fought back a surge of remorse. Maybe I'd been too convincing on the beach.

'Are you hungry?' I asked, turning toward the kitchen. I was eager to escape Marcus's searching gaze.

'Naw, we ate just before we came,' Nevaeh answered.

'How about you, Marcellus?' I called over my shoulder as I fled around the corner.

'Sure,' he replied, his voice moving in the direction of the front room and the omniscreen. I could hear Marcus's chair follow.

The grilled cheese sandwiches were in the frying pan and I was slicing up a tomato when I sensed someone behind me.

'So, how are things?' Nevaeh asked.

'Pretty good.' I smiled. His enthusiasm was hard to resist. 'How about you? Did you finish your car?'

'No.' He frowned. 'I still need parts. We borrowed that one.' He pointed with his thumb in the direction of the front yard.

'Sorry. I haven't seen any... what was it you were looking for?'

'Master cylinder.' He grinned. 'Is something wrong with the truck?' he added suddenly.

'No.'

'Oh. I just wondered because you weren't driving it.'

I stared down at the pan, pulling up the edge of a sandwich to check the bottom side. 'I got a ride with a friend.'

'Nice ride.' Nevaeh's voice was admiring. 'I didn't recognize the driver, though. I thought I knew most of the kids around here.'

I nodded noncommittally, keeping my eyes down as I flipped sandwiches.

'My dad seemed to know him from somewhere.'

'Nevaeh, could you hand me some plates? They're in the cupboard over the sink.'

'Sure.'

He got the plates in silence. I hoped he would let it drop now.

'So who was it?' he asked, setting two plates on the counter next to me.

I sighed in defeat. 'Eryndor Ainsley.'

To my surprise, he laughed. I glanced up at him. He looked a little embarrassed.

'Guess that explains it, then,' he said. 'I wondered why my dad was acting so strange.'

'That's right.' I faked an innocent expression. 'He doesn't like the Ainsleys.'

'Superstitious old man,' Nevaeh muttered under his breath.

'You don't think he'd say anything to Marcellus?' I couldn't help asking, the words coming out in a low rush.

Nevaeh stared at me for a moment, and I couldn't read the expression in his dark eyes. 'I doubt it,' he finally answered. 'I think Marcellus chewed him out pretty good last time. They haven't spoken much since - tonight is sort of a reunion, I think. I don't think he'd bring it up again.'

'Oh,' I said, trying to sound indifferent.

I stayed in the front room after I carried the food out to Marcellus, pretending to watch the game while Nevaeh chattered at me. I was really listening to the men's conversation, watching for any sign that Marcus was about to rat me out, trying to think of ways to stop him if he began.

It was a long night. I had a lot of homework that was going undone, but I was afraid to leave Marcus alone with Marcellus. Finally, the game ended.

'Are you and your friends coming back to the beach soon?' Nevaeh asked as he pushed his father over the lip of the threshold.

'I'm not sure,' I hedged.

'That was fun, Marcellus,' Marcus said.

'Come up for the next game,' Marcellus encouraged.

'Sure, sure,' Marcus said. 'We'll be here. Have a good night.' His eyes shifted to mine, and his smile disappeared. 'You take care, Naddalin,' he added seriously.

'Thanks,' I muttered, looking away.

I headed for the stairs while Marcellus waved from the doorway.

'Wait, Naddalin,' he said.

I cringed. Had Marcus gotten something in before I'd joined them in the living room?

But Marcellus was relaxed, still grinning from the unexpected visit.

'I didn't get a chance to talk to you tonight. How was your day?'

'Good.' I hesitated with one foot on the first stair, searching for details I could safely share. 'My badminton team won all four games.'

'Wow, I didn't know you could play badminton.'

'Well, actually I can't, but my partner is really good,' I admitted.

'Who is it?' he asked with token interest.

'Um... Kaelen Newton,' I told him reluctantly.

'Oh yeah – you said you were friends with the Kaelen kid.' He perked up. 'Nice family.' He mused for a minute. 'Why didn't you ask him to the dance this weekend?'

'Dad!' I groaned. 'He's kind of dating my friend Selene. Besides, you know I can't dance.'

'Oh yeah,' he muttered. Then he smiled at me apologetically. 'So I guess it's good you'll be gone Saturday... I've made plans to go fishing with the guys from the station. The weather's supposed to be real warm. But if you wanted to put your trip off till someone could go with you, I'd stay home. I know I leave you here alone too much.'

'Dad, you're doing a great job.' I smiled, hoping my relief didn't show. 'I've never minded being alone - I'm too much like you.' I winked at him, and he smiled his crinkly-eyed smile.

I slept better that night, too tired to dream again. When I woke to the pearl gray morning, my mood was blissful. The tense evening with Marcus and Nevaeh seemed harmless enough now; I decided to forget it completely. I caught myself whistling while I was pulling the front part of my hair back into a barrette, and later again as I skipped down the stairs. Marcellus noticed.

'You're cheerful this morning,' he commented over breakfast.

I shrugged. 'It's Friday.'

I hurried so I would be ready to go the second Marcellus left. I had my bag ready, shoes on, teeth brushed, but even though I rushed to the door as soon as I was sure Marcellus would be out of sight, Eryndor was faster. He was waiting in his shiny car, windows down, engine off.

I didn't hesitate this time, climbing in the passenger side quickly, the sooner to see his face. He grinned his crooked smile at me, stopping my breath and my heart. I couldn't imagine how an angel could be any more glorious. There was nothing about him that could be improved upon.

'How did you sleep?' he asked. I wondered if he had any idea how appealing his voice was.

'Fine. How was your night?'

'Pleasant.' His smile was amused; I felt like I was missing an inside joke.

'Can I ask what you did?' I asked.

'No.' He grinned. 'Today is still mine.'

He wanted to know about people today: more about Aurora, her hobbies, what we'd done in our free time together. And then the one grandmother I'd known, my few school friends – embarrassing me when he asked about boys I'd dated. I was relieved that I'd never really dated anyone, so that particular

conversation couldn't last long. He seemed as surprised as Selene and Seraphina by my lack of romantic history.

'So you never met anyone you wanted?' he asked in a serious tone that made me wonder what he was thinking about.

I was grudgingly honest. 'Not in Western PA.'

His lips pressed together into a hard line.

We were in the cafeteria at this point. The day had sped by in the blur that was rapidly becoming routine. I took advantage of his brief pause to take a bite of my bagel.

'I should have let you drive yourself today,' he announced, apropos of nothing, while I chewed.

'Why?' I demanded.

'I'm leaving with Aura after lunch.'

'Oh.' I blinked, bewildered and disappointed. 'That's okay, it's not that far of a walk.'

He frowned at me impatiently. 'I'm not going to make you walk home. We'll go get your truck and leave it here for you.'

'I don't have my key with me,' I sighed. 'I really don't mind walking.' What I minded was losing my time with him.

He shook his head. 'Your truck will be here, and the key will be in the ignition - unless you're afraid someone might steal it.' He laughed at the thought.

'All right,' I agreed, pursing my lips. I was pretty sure my key was in the pocket of a pair of jeans I wore Wednesday, under a pile of clothes in the laundry room. Even if he broke into my house, or whatever he was planning, he'd never find it. He seemed to feel the challenge in my consent. He smirked, overconfident.

'So where are you going?' I asked as casually as I could manage.

'Hunting,' he answered grimly. 'If I'm going to be alone with you tomorrow, I'm

going to take whatever precautions I can.' His face grew morose... and pleading. 'You can always cancel, you know.'

I looked down, afraid of the persuasive power of his eyes. I refused to be convinced to fear him, no matter how real the danger might be. It doesn't matter, I repeated in my head.

'No,' I whispered, glancing back at his face. 'I can't.'

'Perhaps you're right,' he murmured bleakly. His eyes seemed to darken in color as I watched.

I changed the subject. 'What time will I see you tomorrow?' I asked, already depressed by the thought of him leaving now.

'That depends... it's a Saturday, don't you want to sleep in?' he offered.

'No,' I answered too fast. He restrained a smile.

'The same time as usual, then,' he decided.
'Will Marcellus be there?'

'No, he's fishing tomorrow.' I beamed at the memory of how conveniently things had worked out.

His voice turned sharp. 'And if you don't come home, what will he think?'

'I have no idea,' I answered coolly. 'He knows I've been meaning to do the laundry. Maybe he'll think I fell in the washer.'

He scowled at me and I scowled back. His anger was much more impressive than mine.

'What are you hunting tonight?' I asked when I was sure I had lost the glowering contest.

'Whatever we find in the park. We aren't going far.' He seemed bemused by my casual reference to his secret realities.

'Why are you going with Aura?' I wondered.

'Aura is the most... supportive.' He frowned as he spoke.

'And the others?' I asked timidly. 'What are they?'

His brow puckered for a brief moment.
'Incredulous, for the most part.'

I peeked quickly behind me at his family.
They sat staring off in different directions,
exactly the same as the first time I'd seen
them. Only now they were four; their
beautiful, bronze-haired brother sat across
from me, his golden eyes troubled.

'They don't like me,' I guessed.

'That's not it,' he disagreed, but his eyes
were too innocent. 'They don't understand why
I can't leave you alone.'

I grimaced. 'Neither do I, for that matter.'

Eryndor shook his head slowly, rolling his
eyes toward the ceiling before he met my gaze

again. 'I told you – you don't see yourself clearly at all. You're not like anyone I've ever known. You fascinate me.'

I glared at him, sure he was teasing now.

He smiled as he deciphered my expression. 'Having the advantages I do,' he murmured, touching his forehead discreetly, 'I have a better than average grasp of human nature. People are predictable. But you... you never do what I expect. You always take me by surprise.'

I looked away, my eyes wandering back to his family, embarrassed and dissatisfied. His words made me feel like a science experiment. I wanted to laugh at myself for expecting anything else.

'That part is easy enough to explain,' he continued. I felt his eyes on my face but I couldn't look at him yet, afraid he might read the chagrin in my eyes. 'But there's more... and it's not so easy to put into words -'

I was still staring at the Ainsleys while he spoke. Suddenly Lysandra, his blond and breathtaking sister, turned to look at me. No, not to look - to glare, with dark, cold eyes. I wanted to look away, but her gaze held me until Eryndor broke off mid-sentence and made an angry noise under his breath. It was almost a hiss.

Lysandra turned her head, and I was relieved to be free. I looked back at Eryndor - and I knew he could see the confusion and fear that widened my eyes.

His face was tight as he explained. 'I'm sorry about that. She's just worried. You see... it's dangerous for more than just me if, after spending so much time with you so publicly...' He looked down.

'If?'

'If this ends... badly.' He dropped his head into his hands, as he had that night in Port Angeles. His anguish was plain; I yearned to comfort him, but I was at a loss to know how. My hand reached toward him involuntarily; quickly, though, I dropped it to the table, fearing that my touch would only make things worse. I realized slowly that his words should frighten me. I waited for that fear to come, but all I could seem to feel was an ache for his pain.

And frustration – frustration that Lysandra had interrupted whatever he was about to say. I didn't know how to bring it up again. He still had his head in his hands.

I tried to speak in a normal voice. 'And you have to leave now?'

'Yes.' He raised his face; it was serious for a moment, and then his mood shifted and he smiled. 'It's probably for the best. We still have fifteen minutes of that wretched movie left to endure in Biology – I don't think I could take any more.'

I started. Aura – her short, inky hair in a halo of spiky disarray around her exquisite, elfin face – was suddenly standing behind his

shoulder. Her slight frame was willowy, graceful even in absolute stillness.

He greeted her without looking away from me. 'Aura.'

'Eryndor,' she answered, her high soprano voice almost as attractive as his.

'Aura, Naddalin - Naddalin, Aura,' he introduced us, gesturing casually with his hand, a wry smile on his face.

'Hello, Naddalin.' Her brilliant obsidian eyes were unreadable, but her smile was friendly. 'It's nice to finally meet you.'

Eryndor flashed a dark look at her.

'Hi, Aura,' I murmured shyly.

'Are you ready?' she asked him.

His voice was aloof. 'Nearly. I'll meet you at the car.'

She left without another word; her walk was so fluid, so sinuous that I felt a sharp pang of jealousy.

'Should I say 'have fun,' or is that the wrong sentiment?' I asked, turning back to him.

'No, 'have fun' works as well as anything.' He grinned.

'Have fun, then.' I worked to sound wholehearted. Of course I didn't fool him.

'I'll try.' He still grinned. 'And you try to be safe, please.'

'Safe in Rockville – what a challenge.'

'For you it is a challenge.' His jaw
hardened. 'Promise.'

'I promise to try to be safe,' I recited. 'I'll
do the laundry tonight – that ought to be
fraught with peril.'

'Don't fall in,' he mocked.

'I'll do my best.'

He stood then, and I rose, too.

'I'll see you tomorrow,' I sighed.

'It seems like a long time to you, doesn't
it?' he mused.

I nodded glumly.

'I'll be there in the morning,' he promised, smiling his crooked smile. He reached across the table to touch my face, lightly brushing along my cheekbone again. Then he turned and walked away. I stared after him until he was gone.

I was sorely tempted to ditch the rest of the day, at the very least Gym, but a warning instinct stopped me. I knew that if I disappeared now, Kaelen and others would assume I was with Eryndor. And Eryndor was worried about the time we'd spent together publicly... if things went wrong. I refused to dwell on the last thought, concentrating instead on making things safer for him.

I intuitively knew – and sensed he did, too – that tomorrow would be pivotal. Our

relationship couldn't continue to balance, as it did, on the point of a knife. We would fall off one edge or the other, depending entirely upon his decision, or his instincts. My decision was made, made before I'd ever consciously chosen, and I was committed to seeing it through. Because there was nothing more terrifying to me, more excruciating, than the thought of turning away from him. It was an impossibility.

I went to class, feeling dutiful. I couldn't honestly say what happened in Biology; my mind was too preoccupied with thoughts of tomorrow. In Gym, Kaelen was speaking to me again; he wished me a good time in Seattle. I carefully explained that I'd canceled my trip, worried about my truck.

'Are you going to the dance with Ainsley?'
he asked, suddenly sulky.

'No, I'm not going to the dance at all.'

'What are you doing, then?' he asked, too
interested.

My natural urge was to tell him to butt
out. Instead, I lied brightly.

'Laundry, and then I have to study for the
Trig test or I'm going to fail.'

'Is Ainsley helping you study?'

'Eryndor,' I emphasized, 'is not going to
help me study. He's gone away somewhere for
the weekend.' The lies came more naturally
than usual, I noted with surprise.

'Oh.' He perked up. 'You know, you could come to the dance with our group anyway - that would be cool. We'd all dance with you,' he promised.

The mental image of Selene's face made my tone sharper than necessary.

'I'm not going to the dance, Kaelen, okay?'

'Fine.' He sulked again. 'I was just offering.'

When the school day had finally ended, I walked to the parking lot without enthusiasm. I did not especially want to walk home, but I couldn't see how he would have retrieved my truck. Then again, I was starting to believe that nothing was impossible for him. The latter instinct proved correct - my truck sat in the

same space he'd parked his Volvo in this morning. I shook my head, incredulous, as I opened the unlocked door and saw the key in the ignition.

There was a piece of white paper folded on my seat. I got in and closed the door before I unfolded it. Two words were written in his elegant script.

Be safe.

The sound of the truck roaring to life frightened me. I laughed at myself.

When I got home, the handle of the door was locked, the dead bolt unlocked, just as I'd left it this morning. Inside, I went straight to the laundry room. It looked just the same as I'd left it, too. I dug for my jeans and, after

finding them, checked the pockets. Empty. Maybe I'd hung my key up after all, I thought, shaking my head.

Following the same instinct that had prompted me to lie to Kaelen, I called Selene on the pretense of wishing her luck at the dance. When she offered the same wish for my day with Eryndor, I told her about the cancellation. She was more disappointed than really necessary for a third-party observer to be. I said goodbye quickly after that.

Marcellus was absentminded at dinner, worried over something at work, I guessed, or maybe a basketball game, or maybe he was just really enjoying the lasagna - it was hard to tell with Marcellus.

'You know, Dad...' I began, breaking into his reverie.

'What's that, Naddalin?'

'I think you're right about Seattle. I think I'll wait until Selene or someone else can go with me.'

'Oh,' he said, surprised. 'Oh, okay. So, do you want me to stay home?'

'No, Dad, don't change your plans. I've got a million things to do... homework, laundry... I need to go to the library and the grocery store. I'll be in and out all day... you go and have fun.'

'Are you sure?'

'Absolutely, Dad. Besides, the freezer is getting dangerously low on fish – we're down to a two, maybe three years' supply.'

'You're sure easy to live with, Naddalin.'

He smiled.

'I could say the same thing about you,' I said, laughing. The sound of my laughter was off, but he didn't seem to notice. I felt so guilty for deceiving him that I almost took Eryndor's advice and told him where I would be. Almost.

After dinner, I folded clothes and moved another load through the dryer. Unfortunately, it was the kind of job that only keeps hands busy. My mind definitely had too much free time, and it was getting out of control. I fluctuated between anticipation so intense that

it was very nearly pain, and an insidious fear that picked at my resolve. I had to keep reminding myself that I'd made my choice, and I wasn't going back on it. I pulled his note out of my pocket much more often than necessary to absorb the two small words he'd written. He wants me to be safe, I told myself again and again. I would just hold on to the faith that, in the end, that desire would win out over the others. And what was my other choice – to cut him out of my life? Intolerable. Besides, since I'd come to Rockville, it really seemed like my life was about him.

But a tiny voice in the back of my mind worried, wondering if it would hurt very much... if it ended badly.

I was relieved when it was late enough to be acceptable for bedtime. I knew I was far too stressed to sleep, so I did something I'd never done before. I deliberately took unnecessary cold medicine – the kind that knocked me out for a good eight hours. I normally wouldn't condone that type of behavior in myself, but tomorrow would be complicated enough without me being loopy from sleep deprivation on top of everything else. While I waited for the drugs to kick in, I dried my clean hair till it was impeccably straight, and fussed over what I would wear tomorrow. With everything ready for the morning, I finally lay in my bed. I felt hyper; I couldn't stop twitching. I got up and rifled through my shoebox of data-crystals until I found a collection of Chopin's nocturnes. I put that on very quietly and then

lay down again, concentrating on relaxing individual parts of my body. Somewhere in the middle of that exercise, the cold pills took effect, and I gladly sank into unconsciousness.

I woke early, having slept soundly and dreamlessly thanks to my gratuitous drug use. Though I was well rested, I slipped right back into the same hectic frenzy from the night before. I dressed in a rush, smoothing my collar against my neck, fidgeting with the tan sweater till it hung right over my jeans. I sneaked a swift look out the window to see that Marcellus was already gone. A thin, cottony layer of clouds veiled the sky. They didn't look very lasting.

I ate breakfast without tasting the food, hurrying to clean up when I was done. I

peeked out the window again, but nothing had changed. I had just finished brushing my teeth and was heading back downstairs when a quiet knock sent my heart thudding against my rib cage.

I flew to the door; I had a little trouble with the simple dead bolt, but I yanked the door open at last, and there he was. All the agitation dissolved as soon as I looked at his face, calm taking its place. I breathed a sigh of relief – yesterday's fears seemed very foolish with him here.

He wasn't smiling at first – his face was somber. But then his expression lightened as he looked me over, and he laughed.

'Good morning,' he chuckled.

'What's wrong?' I glanced down to make sure I hadn't forgotten anything important, like shoes, or pants.

'We match.' He laughed again. I realized he had a long, light tan sweater on, with a white collar showing underneath, and blue jeans. I laughed with him, hiding a secret twinge of regret – why did he have to look like a runway model when I couldn't?

I locked the door behind me while he walked to the truck. He waited by the passenger door with a martyred expression that was easy to understand.

'We made a deal,' I reminded him smugly, climbing into the driver's seat, and reaching over to unlock his door.

'Where to?' I asked.

'Put your seat belt on - I'm nervous already.'

I gave him a dirty look as I complied.

'Where to?' I repeated with a sigh.

'Take the one-oh-one north,' he ordered.

It was surprisingly difficult to concentrate on the road while feeling his gaze on my face. I compensated by driving more carefully than usual through the still-sleeping town.

'Were you planning to make it out of Rockville before nightfall?'

'This truck is old enough to be your car's grandfather - have some respect,' I retorted.

We were soon out of the town limits, despite his negativity. Thick underbrush and green-swathed trunks replaced the lawns and houses.

'Turn right on the one-ten,' he instructed just as I was about to ask. I obeyed silently.

'Now we drive until the pavement ends.'

I could hear a smile in his voice, but I was too afraid of driving off the road and proving him right to look over and be sure.

'And what's there, at the pavement's end?' I wondered.

'A trail.'

'We're hiking?' Thank goodness I'd worn tennis shoes.

'Is that a problem?' He sounded as if he'd expected as much.

'No.' I tried to make the lie sound confident. But if he thought my truck was slow...

'Don't worry, it's only five miles or so, and we're in no hurry.'

Five miles. I didn't answer, so that he wouldn't hear my voice crack in panic. Five miles of treacherous roots and loose stones, trying to twist my ankles or otherwise incapacitate me. This was going to be humiliating.

We drove in silence for a while as I contemplated the coming horror.

'What are you thinking?' he asked
impatiently after a few moments.

I lied again. 'Just wondering where we're
going.'

'It's a place I like to go when the weather
is nice.' We both glanced out the windows at
the thinning clouds after he spoke.

'Marcellus said it would be warm today.'

'And did you tell Marcellus what you were
up to?' he asked.

'Nope.'

'But Selene thinks we're going to Seattle
together?' He seemed cheered by the idea.

'No, I told her you canceled on me - which is true.'

'No one knows you're with me?' Angrily, now.

'That depends... I assume you told Aura?'

'That's very helpful, Naddalin,' he snapped.

I pretended I didn't hear that.

'Are you so depressed by Rockville that it's made you suicidal?' he demanded when I ignored him.

'You said it might cause trouble for you... us being together publicly,' I reminded him.

'So you're worried about the trouble it might cause me – if you don't come home?' His voice was still angry, and bitingly sarcastic.

I nodded, keeping my eyes on the road.

He muttered something under his breath, speaking so quickly that I couldn't understand.

We were silent for the rest of the drive. I could feel the waves of infuriated disapproval rolling off of him, and I could think of nothing to say.

And then the road ended, constricting to a thin foot trail with a small wooden marker. I parked on the narrow shoulder and stepped out, afraid because he was angry with me and I didn't have driving as an excuse not to look at him. It was warm now, warmer than it had

been in Rockville since the day I'd arrived, almost muggy under the clouds. I pulled off my sweater and knotted it around my waist, glad that I'd worn the light, sleeveless shirt – especially if I had five miles of hiking ahead of me.

I heard his door slam, and looked over to see that he'd removed his sweater, too. He was facing away from me, into the unbroken forest beside my truck.

'This way,' he said, glancing over his shoulder at me, eyes still annoyed. He started into the dark forest.

'The trail?' Panic was clear in my voice as I hurried around the truck to catch up to him.

'I said there was a trail at the end of the road, not that we were taking it.'

'No trail?' I asked desperately.

'I won't let you get lost.' He turned then, with a mocking smile, and I stifled a gasp. His white shirt was sleeveless, and he wore it unbuttoned, so that the smooth white skin of his throat flowed uninterrupted over the marble contours of his chest, his perfect musculature no longer merely hinted at behind concealing clothes. He was too perfect, I realized with a piercing stab of despair. There was no way this godlike creature could be meant for me.

He stared at me, bewildered by my tortured expression.

'Do you want to go home?' he said quietly,
a different pain than mine saturating his voice.

'No.' I walked forward till I was close
beside him, anxious not to waste one second of
whatever time I might have with him.

'What's wrong?' he asked, his voice gentle.

'I'm not a good hiker,' I answered dully.
'You'll have to be very patient.'

'I can be patient - if I make a great effort.'
He smiled, holding my glance, trying to lift me
out of my sudden, unexplained dejection.

I tried to smile back, but the smile was
unconvincing. He scrutinized my face.

'I'll take you home,' he promised. I couldn't
tell if the promise was unconditional, or

restricted to an immediate departure. I knew he thought it was fear that upset me, and I was grateful again that I was the one person whose mind he couldn't hear.

'If you want me to hack five miles through the jungle before sundown, you'd better start leading the way,' I said acidly. He frowned at me, struggling to understand my tone and expression.

He gave up after a moment and led the way into the forest.

It wasn't as hard as I had feared. The way was mostly flat, and he held the damp ferns and webs of moss aside for me. When his straight path took us over fallen trees or boulders, he would help me, lifting me by the

elbow, and then releasing me instantly when I was clear. His cold touch on my skin never failed to make my heart thud erratically. Twice, when that happened, I caught a look on his face that made me sure he could somehow hear it.

I tried to keep my eyes away from his perfection as much as possible, but I slipped often. Each time, his beauty pierced me through with sadness.

For the most part, we walked in silence. Occasionally he would ask a random question that he hadn't gotten to in the past two days of interrogation. He asked about my birthdays, my grade school teachers, my childhood pets – and I had to admit that after killing three fish in a row, I'd given up on the whole institution.

He laughed at that, louder than I was used to – bell-like echoes bouncing back to us from the empty woods.

The hike took me most of the morning, but he never showed any sign of impatience. The forest spread out around us in a boundless labyrinth of ancient trees, and I began to be nervous that we would never find our way out again. He was perfectly at ease, comfortable in the green maze, never seeming to feel any doubt about our direction.

After several hours, the light that filtered through the canopy transformed, the murky olive tone shifting to a brighter jade. The day had turned sunny, just as he'd foretold. For the first time since we'd entered the woods, I

felt a thrill of excitement – which quickly turned to impatience.

'Are we there yet?' I teased, pretending to scowl.

'Nearly.' He smiled at the change in my mood. 'Do you see the brightness ahead?'

I peered into the thick forest. 'Um, should I?'

He smirked. 'Maybe it's a bit soon for your eyes.'

'Time to visit the optometrist,' I muttered. His smirk grew more pronounced.

But then, after another hundred yards, I could definitely see a lightening in the trees ahead, a glow that was yellow instead of

green. I picked up the pace, my eagerness growing with every step. He let me lead now, following noiselessly.

I reached the edge of the pool of light and stepped through the last fringe of ferns into the loveliest place I had ever seen. The meadow was small, perfectly round, and filled with wildflowers – violet, yellow, and soft white. Somewhere nearby, I could hear the bubbling music of a stream. The sun was directly overhead, filling the circle with a haze of buttery sunshine. I walked slowly, awestruck, through the soft grass, swaying flowers, and warm, gilded air. I halfway turned, wanting to share this with him, but he wasn't behind me where I thought he'd be. I spun around, searching for him.

Confessions...

Eryndor in the sunlight was shocking. I couldn't get used to it, though I'd been staring at him all afternoon. His skin, white despite the faint flush from yesterday's hunting trip, literally sparkled, like thousands of tiny diamonds were embedded in the surface. He lay perfectly still in the grass, his shirt open over his sculpted, incandescent chest, his scintillating arms bare. His glistening, pale lavender lids were shut, though of course he didn't sleep. A perfect statue, carved in some unknown stone, smooth like marble, glittering like crystal.

Now and then, his lips would move, so fast it looked like they were trembling. But, when I

asked, he told me he was singing to himself; it was too low for me to hear.

I enjoyed the sun, too, though the air wasn't quite dry enough for my taste. I would have liked to lie back, as he did, and let the sun warm my face. But I stayed curled up, my chin resting on my knees, unwilling to take my eyes off him. The wind was gentle; it tangled my hair and ruffled the grass that swayed around his motionless form.

The meadow, so spectacular to me at first, paled next to his magnificence.

Hesitantly, always afraid, even now, that he would disappear like a mirage, too beautiful to be real... hesitantly, I reached out one finger and stroked the back of his

shimmering hand, where it lay within my reach. I marveled again at the perfect texture, satin smooth, cool as stone. When I looked up again, his eyes were open, watching me. Butterscotch today, lighter, warmer after hunting. His quick smile turned up the corners of his flawless lips.

'I don't scare you?' he asked playfully, but I could hear the real curiosity in his soft voice.

'No more than usual.'

He smiled wider; his teeth flashed in the sun.

I inched closer, stretched out my whole hand now to trace the contours of his forearm with my fingertips. I saw that my fingers

trembled, and knew it wouldn't escape his notice.

'Do you mind?' I asked, for he had closed his eyes again.

'No,' he said without opening his eyes.
'You can't imagine how that feels.' He sighed.

I lightly trailed my hand over the perfect muscles of his arm, followed the faint pattern of bluish veins inside the crease at his elbow. With my other hand, I reached to turn his hand over. Realizing what I wished, he flipped his palm up in one of those blindingly fast, disconcerting movements of his. It startled me; my fingers froze on his arm for a brief second.

'Sorry,' he murmured. I looked up in time to see his golden eyes close again. 'It's too easy to be myself with you.'

I lifted his hand, turning it this way and that as I watched the sun glitter on his palm. I held it closer to my face, trying to see the hidden facets in his skin.

'Tell me what you're thinking,' he whispered. I looked to see his eyes watching me, suddenly intent. 'It's still so strange for me, not knowing.'

'You know, the rest of us feel that way all the time.'

'It's a hard life.' Did I imagine the hint of regret in his tone? 'But you didn't tell me.'

'I was wishing I could know what you were thinking...' I hesitated.

'And?'

'I was wishing that I could believe that you were real. And I was wishing that I wasn't afraid.'

'I don't want you to be afraid.' His voice was just a soft murmur. I heard what he couldn't truthfully say, that I didn't need to be afraid, that there was nothing to fear.

'Well, that's not exactly the fear I meant, though that's certainly something to think about.'

So quickly that I missed his movement, he was half sitting, propped up on his right arm,

his left palm still in my hands. His angel's face was only a few inches from mine. I might have - should have - flinched away from his unexpected closeness, but I was unable to move. His golden eyes mesmerized me.

'What are you afraid of, then?' he whispered intently.

But I couldn't answer. As I had just that once before, I smelled his cool breath in my face. Sweet, delicious, the scent made my mouth water. It was unlike anything else. Instinctively, unthinkingly, I leaned closer, inhaling.

And he was gone, his hand ripped from mine. In the time it took my eyes to focus, he was twenty feet away, standing at the edge of

the small meadow, in the deep shade of a huge fir tree. He stared at me, his eyes dark in the shadows, his expression unreadable.

I could feel the hurt and shock on my face. My empty hands stung.

'Naddalin... sorry... Eryndor,' I whispered. I knew he could hear.

'Give me a moment,' he called, just loud enough for my less sensitive ears. I sat very still.

After ten incredibly long seconds, he walked back, slowly for him. He stopped, still several feet away, and sank gracefully to the ground, crossing his legs. His eyes never left mine. He took two deep breaths, and then smiled in apology.

'I am so very sorry.' He hesitated. 'Would you understand what I meant if I said I was only human?'

I nodded once, not quite able to smile at his joke. Adrenaline pulsed through my veins as the realization of danger slowly sank in. He could smell that from where he sat. His smile turned mocking.

'I'm the world's best predator, aren't I? Everything about me invites you in - my voice, my face, even my smell. As if I need any of that!' Unexpectedly, he was on his feet, bounding away, instantly out of sight, only to appear beneath the same tree as before, having circled the meadow in half a second.

'As if you could outrun me,' he laughed bitterly.

He reached up with one hand and, with a deafening crack, effortlessly ripped a two-foot-thick branch from the trunk of the spruce. He balanced it in that hand for a moment, and then threw it with blinding speed, shattering it against another huge tree, which shook and trembled at the blow.

And he was in front of me again, standing two feet away, still as a stone.

'As if you could fight me off,' he said gently.

I sat without moving, more frightened of him than I had ever been. I'd never seen him so completely freed of that carefully cultivated

facade. He'd never been less human... or more beautiful. Face ashen, eyes wide, I sat like a bird locked in the eyes of a snake.

His lovely eyes seem to glow with rash excitement. Then, as the seconds passed, they dimmed. His expression slowly folded into a mask of ancient sadness.

'Don't be afraid,' he murmured, his velvet voice unintentionally seductive. 'I promise...' He hesitated. 'I swear not to hurt you.' He seemed more concerned with convincing himself than me.

'Don't be afraid,' he whispered again as he stepped closer, with exaggerated slowness. He sat sinuously, with deliberately unhurried

movements, till our faces were on the same level, just a foot apart.

'Please forgive me,' he said formally. 'I can control myself. You caught me off guard. But I'm on my best behavior now.'

He waited, but I still couldn't speak.

'I'm not thirsty today, honestly.' He winked.

At that I had to laugh, though the sound was shaky and breathless.

'Are you all right?' he asked tenderly, reaching out slowly, carefully, to place his marble hand back in mine.

I looked at his smooth, cold hand, and then at his eyes. They were soft, repentant. I looked

back at his hand, and then deliberately returned to tracing the lines in his hand with my fingertip. I looked up and smiled timidly.

His answering smile was dazzling.

'So where were we, before I behaved so rudely?' he asked in the gentle cadences of an earlier century.

'I honestly can't remember.'

He smiled, but his face was ashamed. 'I think we were talking about why you were afraid, besides the obvious reason.'

'Oh, right.'

'Well?'

I looked down at his hand and doodled aimlessly across his smooth, iridescent palm. The seconds ticked by.

'How easily frustrated I am,' he sighed. I looked into his eyes, abruptly grasping that this was every bit as new to him as it was to me. As many years of unfathomable experience as he had, this was hard for him, too. I took courage from that thought.

'I was afraid... because, for, well, obvious reasons, I can't stay with you. And I'm afraid that I'd like to stay with you, much more than I should.' I looked down at his hands as I spoke. It was difficult for me to say this aloud.

'Yes,' he agreed slowly. 'That is something to be afraid of, indeed. Wanting to be with me. That's really not in your best interest.'

I frowned.

'I should have left long ago,' he sighed. 'I should leave now. But I don't know if I can.'

'I don't want you to leave,' I mumbled pathetically, staring down again.

'Which is exactly why I should. But don't worry. I'm essentially a selfish creature. I crave your company too much to do what I should.'

'I'm glad.'

'Don't be!' He withdrew his hand, more gently this time; his voice was harsher than

usual. Harsh for him, still more beautiful than any human voice. It was hard to keep up - his sudden mood changes left me always a step behind, dazed.

'It's not only your company I crave! Never forget that. Never forget I am more dangerous to you than I am to anyone else.' He stopped, and I looked to see him gazing unseeingly into the forest.

I thought for a moment.

'I don't think I understand exactly what you mean - by that last part anyway,' I said.

He looked back at me and smiled, his mood shifting yet again.

'How do I explain?' he mused. 'And without frightening you again... hmmm.' Without seeming to think about it, he placed his hand back in mine; I held it tightly in both of mine. He looked at our hands.

'That's amazingly pleasant, the warmth.' He sighed.

A moment passed as he assembled his thoughts.

'You know how everyone enjoys different flavors?' he began. 'Some people love chocolate ice cream, others prefer strawberry?'

I nodded.

'Sorry about the food analogy - I couldn't think of another way to explain.'

I smiled. He smiled ruefully back.

'You see, every person smells different, has a different essence. If you locked an alcoholic in a room full of stale beer, he'd gladly drink it. But he could resist, if he wished to, if he were a recovering alcoholic. Now let's say you placed in that room a glass of hundred-year-old brandy, the rarest, finest cognac - and filled the room with its warm aroma - how do you think he would fare then?'

We sat silently, looking into each other's eyes - trying to read each other's thoughts.

He broke the silence first.

'Maybe that's not the right comparison. Maybe it would be too easy to turn down the brandy. Perhaps I should have made our alcoholic a heroin addict instead.'

'So what you're saying is, I'm your brand of heroin?' I teased, trying to lighten the mood.

He smiled swiftly, seeming to appreciate my effort. 'Yes, you are exactly my brand of heroin.'

'Does that happen often?' I asked.

He looked across the treetops, thinking through his response.

'I spoke to my brothers about it.' He still stared into the distance. 'To Thalen, every one

of you is much the same. He's the most recent to join our family. It's a struggle for him to abstain at all. He hasn't had time to grow sensitive to the differences in smell, in flavor.' He glanced swiftly at me, his expression apologetic.

'Sorry,' he said.

'I don't mind. Please don't worry about offending me, or frightening me, or whichever. That's the way you think. I can understand, or I can try to at least. Just explain however you can.'

He took a deep breath and gazed at the sky again.

'So Thalen wasn't sure if he'd ever come across someone who was as' - he hesitated,

looking for the right word - 'appealing as you are to me. Which makes me think not. Darius has been on the wagon longer, so to speak, and he understood what I meant. He says twice, for him, once stronger than the other.'

'And for you?'

'Never.'

The word hung there for a moment in the warm breeze.

'What did Darius do?' I asked to break the silence.

It was the wrong question to ask. His face grew dark, his hand clenched into a fist inside mine. He looked away. I waited, but he wasn't going to answer.

'I guess I know,' I finally said.

He lifted his eyes; his expression was wistful, pleading.

'Even the strongest of us fall off the wagon, don't we?'

'What are you asking? My permission?' My voice was sharper than I'd intended. I tried to make my tone kinder - I could guess what his honesty must cost him. 'I mean, is there no hope, then?' How calmly I could discuss my own death!

'No, no!' He was instantly contrite. 'Of course there's hope! I mean, of course I won't...' He left the sentence hanging. His eyes burned into mine. 'It's different for us.

Darius... these were strangers he happened

across. It was a long time ago, and he wasn't as... practiced, as careful, as he is now.'

He fell silent and watched me intently as I thought it through.

'So if we'd met... oh, in a dark alley or something...' I trailed off.

'It took everything I had not to jump up in the middle of that class full of children and -'
He stopped abruptly, looking away. 'When you walked past me, I could have ruined everything Carlisle has built for us, right then and there. If I hadn't been denying my thirst for the last, well, too many years, I wouldn't have been able to stop myself.' He paused, scowling at the trees.

He glanced at me grimly, both of us remembering. 'You must have thought I was possessed.'

'I couldn't understand why. How you could hate me so quickly...'

'To me, it was like you were some kind of demon, summoned straight from my own personal hell to ruin me. The fragrance coming off your skin... I thought it would make me deranged that first day. In that one hour, I thought of a hundred different ways to lure you from the room with me, to get you alone. And I fought them each back, thinking of my family, what I could do to them. I had to run out, to get away before I could speak the words that would make you follow...'

He looked up then at my staggered expression as I tried to absorb his bitter memories. His golden eyes scorched from under his lashes, hypnotic and deadly.

'You would have come,' he promised.

I tried to speak calmly. 'Without a doubt.'

He frowned down at my hands, releasing me from the force of his stare. 'And then, as I tried to rearrange my schedule in a pointless attempt to avoid you, you were there - in that close, warm little room, the scent was maddening. I so very nearly took you then. There was only one other frail human there - so easily dealt with.'

I shivered in the warm sun, seeing my memories anew through his eyes, only now

grasping the danger. Poor Ms. Cope; I shivered again at how close I'd come to being inadvertently responsible for her death.

'But I resisted. I don't know how. I forced myself not to wait for you, not to follow you from the school. It was easier outside, when I couldn't smell you anymore, to think clearly, to make the right decision. I left the others near home - I was too ashamed to tell them how weak I was, they only knew something was very wrong - and then I went straight to Carlisle, at the hospital, to tell him I was leaving.'

I stared in surprise.

'I traded cars with him - he had a full tank of gas and I didn't want to stop. I didn't dare

to go home, to face Esme. She wouldn't have let me go without a scene. She would have tried to convince me that it wasn't necessary...

'By the next morning I was in Alaska.' He sounded ashamed, as if admitting a great cowardice. 'I spent two days there, with some old acquaintances... but I was homesick. I hated knowing I'd upset Esme, and the rest of them, my adopted family. In the pure air of the mountains it was hard to believe you were so irresistible. I convinced myself it was weak to run away. I'd dealt with temptation before, not of this magnitude, not even close, but I was strong. Who were you, an insignificant little girl' - he grinned suddenly - 'to chase me from the place I wanted to be? So I came back...' He stared off into space.

I couldn't speak.

'I took precautions, hunting, feeding more than usual before seeing you again. I was sure that I was strong enough to treat you like any other human. I was arrogant about it.

'It was unquestionably a complication that I couldn't simply read your thoughts to know what your reaction was to me. I wasn't used to having to go to such circuitous measures, listening to your words in Selene's mind... her mind isn't very original, and it was annoying to have to stoop to that. And then I couldn't know if you really meant what you said. It was all extremely irritating.' He frowned at the memory.

'I wanted you to forget my behavior that first day, if possible, so I tried to talk with you like I would with any person. I was eager actually, hoping to decipher some of your thoughts. But you were too interesting, I found myself caught up in your expressions... and every now and then you would stir the air with your hand or your hair, and the scent would stun me again...

'Of course, then you were nearly crushed to death in front of my eyes. Later I thought of a perfectly good excuse for why I acted at that moment - because if I hadn't saved you, if your blood had been spilled there in front of me, I don't think I could have stopped myself from exposing us for what we are. But I only

thought of that excuse later. At the time, all I could think was, 'Not her.'

He closed his eyes, lost in his agonized confession. I listened, more eager than rational. Common sense told me I should be terrified. Instead, I was relieved to finally understand. And I was filled with compassion for his suffering, even now, as he confessed his craving to take my life.

I finally was able to speak, though my voice was faint. 'In the hospital?'

His eyes flashed up to mine. 'I was appalled. I couldn't believe I had put us in danger after all, put myself in your power - you of all people. As if I needed another motive to kill you.' We both flinched as that word

slipped out. 'But it had the opposite effect,' he continued quickly. 'I fought with Lysandra, Darius, and Thalen when they suggested that now was the time... the worst fight we've ever had. Carlisle sided with me, and Aura.' He grimaced when he said her name. I couldn't imagine why. 'Esme told me to do whatever I had to in order to stay.' He shook his head indulgently.

'All that next day I eavesdropped on the minds of everyone you spoke to, shocked that you kept your word. I didn't understand you at all. But I knew that I couldn't become more involved with you. I did my very best to stay as far from you as possible. And every day the perfume of your skin, your breath, your hair... it hit me as hard as the very first day.'

He met my eyes again, and they were surprisingly tender.

'And for all that,' he continued, 'I'd have fared better if I had exposed us all at that first moment, than if now, here - with no witnesses and nothing to stop me - I were to hurt you.'

I was human enough to have to ask. 'Why?'

'Naddalin.' He pronounced my full name carefully, then playfully ruffled my hair with his free hand. A shock ran through my body at his casual touch. 'Naddalin, I couldn't live with myself if I ever hurt you. You don't know how it's tortured me.' He looked down, ashamed again. 'The thought of you, still, white, cold... to never see you blush scarlet again, to never see that flash of intuition in your eyes when

you see through my pretenses... it would be unendurable.' He lifted his glorious, agonized eyes to mine. 'You are the most vital element in my existence now. The most vital element to me, ever.'

My head was spinning at the rapid change in direction our conversation had taken. From the cheerful topic of my impending demise, we were suddenly acknowledging the profound nature of our connection. He waited, and even though I looked down to study our hands between us, I knew his golden eyes were on me. 'You already know how I feel, of course,' I finally said. 'I'm here... which, roughly translated, means I would rather die than stay away from you.' I frowned. 'I'm an idiot.'

'You are an idiot,' he agreed with a laugh. Our eyes met, and I laughed, too. We laughed together at the idiocy and sheer impossibility of such a moment.

'And so the predator found his fascination in the lamb...' he murmured. I looked away, hiding my eyes as I thrilled to the word.

'What a stupid lamb,' I sighed.

'What a sick, masochistic lion.' He stared into the shadowy forest for a long moment, and I wondered where his thoughts had taken him.

'Why... ?' I began, and then paused, not sure how to continue.

He looked at me and smiled; sunlight glinted off his face, his teeth.

'Yes?'

'Tell me why you ran from me before.'

His smile faded. 'You know why.'

'No, I mean, exactly what did I do wrong? I'll have to be on my guard, you see, so I better start learning what I shouldn't do. This, for example' - I stroked the back of his hand - 'seems to be all right.'

He smiled again. 'You didn't do anything wrong, Naddalin. It was my fault.'

'But I want to help, if I can, to not make this harder for you.'

'Well...' He contemplated for a moment. 'It was just how close you were. Most humans instinctively shy away from us, are repelled by our alienness... I wasn't expecting you to come so close. And the smell of your throat.' He stopped short, looking to see if he'd upset me.

'Okay, then,' I said flippantly, trying to alleviate the suddenly tense atmosphere. I tucked my chin. 'No throat exposure.'

It worked; he laughed. 'No, really, it was more the surprise than anything else.'

He raised his free hand and placed it gently on the side of my neck. I sat very still, the chill of his touch a natural warning - a warning telling me to be terrified. But there

was no feeling of fear in me. There were, however, other feelings...

'You see,' he said. 'Perfectly fine.'

My blood was racing, and I wished I could slow it, sensing that this must make everything so much more difficult - the thudding of my pulse in my veins. Surely he could hear it.

'The blush on your cheeks is lovely,' he murmured. He gently freed his other hand. My hands fell limply into my lap. Softly he brushed my cheek, then held my face between his marble hands.

'Be very still,' he whispered, as if I wasn't already frozen.

Slowly, never moving his eyes from mine, he leaned toward me. Then abruptly, but very gently, he rested his cold cheek against the hollow at the base of my throat. I was quite unable to move, even if I'd wanted to.

I listened to the sound of his even breathing, watching the sun and wind play in his bronze hair, more human than any other part of him.

With deliberate slowness, his hands slid down the sides of my neck. I shivered, and I heard him catch his breath. But his hands didn't pause as they softly moved to my shoulders, and then stopped.

His face drifted to the side, his nose skimming across my collarbone. He came to

rest with the side of his face pressed tenderly against my chest.

Listening to my heart.

'Ah,' he sighed.

I don't know how long we sat without moving. It could have been hours. Eventually the throb of my pulse quieted, but he didn't move or speak again as he held me. I knew at any moment it could be too much, and my life could end - so quickly that I might not even notice. And I couldn't make myself be afraid. I couldn't think of anything, except that he was touching me.

And then, too soon, he released me.

His eyes were peaceful.

'It won't be so hard again,' he said with satisfaction.

'Was that very hard for you?'

'Not nearly as bad as I imagined it would be. And you?'

'No, it wasn't bad... for me.'

He smiled at my inflection. 'You know what I mean.'

I smiled.

'Here.' He took my hand and placed it against his cheek. 'Do you feel how warm it is?'

And it was almost warm, his usually icy skin. But I barely noticed, for I was touching

his face, something I'd dreamed of constantly since the first day I'd seen him.

'Don't move,' I whispered.

No one could be still like Eryndor. He closed his eyes and became as immobile as stone, a carving under my hand.

I moved even more slowly than he had, careful not to make one unexpected move. I caressed his cheek, delicately stroked his eyelid, the purple shadow in the hollow under his eye. I traced the shape of his perfect nose, and then, so carefully, his flawless lips. His lips parted under my hand, and I could feel his cool breath on my fingertips. I wanted to lean in, to inhale the scent of him. So I dropped my

hand and leaned away, not wanting to push him too far.

He opened his eyes, and they were hungry. Not in a way to make me fear, but rather to tighten the muscles in the pit of my stomach and send my pulse hammering through my veins again.

'I wish,' he whispered, 'I wish you could feel the... complexity... the confusion... I feel. That you could understand.'

He raised his hand to my hair, then carefully brushed it across my face.

'Tell me,' I breathed.

'I don't think I can. I've told you, on the one hand, the hunger - the thirst - that,

deplorable creature that I am, I feel for you. And I think you can understand that, to an extent. Though' - he half-smiled - 'as you are not addicted to any illegal substances, you probably can't empathize completely.

'But...' His fingers touched my lips lightly, making me shiver again. 'There are other hungers. Hungers I don't even understand, that are foreign to me.'

'I may understand that better than you think.'

'I'm not used to feeling so human. Is it always like this?'

'For me?' I paused. 'No, never. Never before this.'

He held my hands between his. They felt so feeble in his iron strength.

'I don't know how to be close to you,' he admitted. 'I don't know if I can.'

I leaned forward very slowly, cautioning him with my eyes. I placed my cheek against his stone chest. I could hear his breath, and nothing else.

'This is enough,' I sighed, closing my eyes.

In a very human gesture, he put his arms around me and pressed his face against my hair.

'You're better at this than you give yourself credit for,' I noted.

'I have human instincts - they may be buried deep, but they're there.'

We sat like that for another immeasurable moment; I wondered if he could be as unwilling to move as I was. But I could see the light was fading, the shadows of the forest beginning to touch us, and I sighed.

'You have to go.'

'I thought you couldn't read my mind.'

'It's getting clearer.' I could hear a smile in his voice.

He took my shoulders and I looked into his face.

'Can I show you something?' he asked, sudden excitement flaring in his eyes.

'Show me what?'

'I'll show you how I travel in the forest.' He saw my expression. 'Don't worry, you'll be very safe, and we'll get to your truck much faster.' His mouth twitched up into that crooked smile so beautiful my heart nearly stopped.

'Will you turn into a bat?' I asked warily.

He laughed, louder than I'd ever heard. 'Like I haven't heard that one before!'

'Right, I'm sure you get that all the time.'

'Come on, little coward, climb on my back.'

I waited to see if he was kidding, but, apparently, he meant it. He smiled as he read my hesitation, and reached for me. My heart reacted; even though he couldn't hear my

thoughts, my pulse always gave me away. He then proceeded to sling me onto his back, with very little effort on my part, besides, when in place, clamping my legs and arms so tightly around him that it would choke a normal person. It was like clinging to a stone.

'I'm a bit heavier than your average backpack,' I warned.

'Hah!' he snorted. I could almost hear his eyes rolling. I'd never seen him in such high spirits before.

He startled me, suddenly grabbing my hand, pressing my palm to his face, and inhaling deeply.

'Easier all the time,' he muttered.

And then he was running.

If I'd ever feared death before in his presence, it was nothing compared to how I felt now.

He streaked through the dark, thick underbrush of the forest like a bullet, like a ghost. There was no sound, no evidence that his feet touched the earth. His breathing never changed, never indicated any effort. But the trees flew by at deadly speeds, always missing us by inches.

I was too terrified to close my eyes, though the cool forest air whipped against my face and burned them. I felt as if I were stupidly sticking my head out the window of an airplane in flight. And, for the first time in my

life, I felt the dizzy faintness of motion sickness.

Then it was over. We'd hiked hours this morning to reach Eryndor's meadow, and now, in a matter of minutes, we were back to the truck.

'Exhilarating, isn't it?' His voice was high, excited.

He stood motionless, waiting for me to climb down. I tried, but my muscles wouldn't respond. My arms and legs stayed locked around him while my head spun uncomfortably.

'Naddalin?' he asked, anxious now.

'I think I need to lie down,' I gasped.

'Oh, sorry.' He waited for me, but I still couldn't move.

'I think I need help,' I admitted.

He laughed quietly, and gently unloosened my stranglehold on his neck. There was no resisting the iron strength of his hands. Then he pulled me around to face him, cradling me in his arms like a small child. He held me for a moment, then carefully placed me on the springy ferns.

'How do you feel?' he asked.

I couldn't be sure how I felt when my head was spinning so crazily. 'Dizzy, I think.'

'Put your head between your knees.'

I tried that, and it helped a little. I breathed in and out slowly, keeping my head very still. I felt him sitting beside me. The moments passed, and eventually I found that I could raise my head. There was a hollow ringing sound in my ears.

'I guess that wasn't the best idea,' he mused.

I tried to be positive, but my voice was weak. 'No, it was very interesting.'

'Hah! You're as white as a ghost - no, you're as white as me!'

'I think I should have closed my eyes.'

'Remember that next time.'

'Next time!' I groaned.

He laughed, his mood still radiant.

'Show-off,' I muttered.

'Open your eyes, Naddalin,' he said quietly.

And he was right there, his face so close to mine. His beauty stunned my mind - it was too much, an excess I couldn't grow accustomed to.

'I was thinking, while I was running...' He paused.

'About not hitting the trees, I hope.'

'Silly Naddalin,' he chuckled. 'Running is second nature to me, it's not something I have to think about.'

'Show-off,' I muttered again.

He smiled.

'No,' he continued, 'I was thinking there was something I wanted to try.' And he took my face in his hands again.

I couldn't breathe.

He hesitated - not in the normal way, the human way.

Not the way a human might hesitate before a moment of profound intimacy, to gauge a reaction, to see how the connection would be received. Perhaps to prolong the anticipation, that ideal moment, sometimes more potent than the act itself.

Eryndor hesitated to test himself, to see if this was safe, to make sure he was still in control of his primal need.

And then his cold, marble-like skin pressed very softly against mine, a contact that sent a jolt of raw energy through me.

What neither of us was prepared for was my response.

Blood boiled under my skin, burned in my lips. My breath came in a wild gasp. My fingers knotted in his hair, clutching him to me. My lips parted as I breathed in his heady scent.

Immediately I felt him turn to unresponsive stone beneath my touch. His hands gently, but with irresistible force,

pushed my face back. I opened my eyes and saw his guarded expression.

'Oops,' I breathed.

'That's an understatement.'

His eyes were wild, his jaw clenched in acute restraint, yet he didn't lapse from his perfect articulation. He held my face just inches from his. He dazzled my eyes.

'Should I... ?' I tried to disengage myself, to give him some room.

His hands refused to let me move so much as an inch.

'No, it's tolerable. Wait for a moment, please.' His voice was polite, controlled.

I kept my eyes on him.

'Regardless,' he finally murmured, 'I have better reflexes.'

He opened the truck door for me, and I slid in, the familiar scent of old upholstery and pine air freshener a grounding presence after the whirlwind of the last few minutes. He walked around to the driver's side, his movements fluid and silent. As he settled into the driver's seat, the truck dipped slightly, a normal reaction to a normal person, but it felt almost imperceptible with him.

'Seatbelt,' he reminded me, his voice a low rumble.

I fumbled with the buckle, my hands still a little shaky. He watched me, a faint, amused

smile playing on his lips. When I was finally secured, he inserted the key and the old engine rumbled to life, a comforting, familiar sound.

'Ready?' he asked, his eyes sparkling with an excitement that seemed almost out of place for him, yet perfectly suited to this new, more open Edward.

'As I'll ever be,' I mumbled, bracing myself.

He backed the truck out with a precision I rarely achieved, even on my best days. The ride was surprisingly smooth. He drove with an almost unnatural grace, anticipating every curve, every bump, as if the road itself whispered its secrets to him. The trees blurred

past, but not with the terrifying speed of his forest dash. This was controlled, powerful, yet gentle.

'You're right,' I admitted, after a few minutes of silent observation. 'You do drive better than me.'

He chuckled, a rich, melodic sound that vibrated through the small cab. 'I told you.'

The silence that followed was comfortable, filled with the hum of the engine and the soft rush of wind past the windows. I watched his profile, the sharp, elegant lines of his face, the way his golden eyes occasionally flickered to me before returning to the road. It was still hard to believe this was happening, that this creature of impossible beauty and terrifying

power was here, with me, driving my beat-up truck.

'What were you thinking about just now?' I asked, breaking the quiet.

He turned his head slightly, and his smile widened. 'About how much I enjoy watching you think. Your expressions are remarkably transparent, even without the benefit of hearing your thoughts.'

I blushed, feeling a familiar warmth spread across my cheeks. 'Is that a good thing?'

'It is,' he assured me, his voice soft. 'It makes you very... real.'

'And you're not?' I couldn't resist the tease.

His smile faded, replaced by a more contemplative expression. 'I am real, Naddalin. More real than you can imagine. But my reality is... different. Sometimes, I forget what it's like to be so openly human, to feel things so intensely and without filter.' He paused, then glanced at me, his eyes tender. 'You remind me.'

The truck pulled onto the main road, the familiar stretch of asphalt leading back to Forks. The streetlights began to appear, casting long, distorted shadows. The world outside the truck felt normal, mundane, a stark contrast to the extraordinary conversation we'd just had.

'So,' I began, choosing my words carefully, 'about what you said earlier... about me being your 'brand of heroin.'

He exhaled slowly, a sound like a soft sigh. 'It's an imperfect analogy, but yes. You are. The scent of your blood, your skin... it's unlike anything I've ever encountered. It's a constant, overwhelming temptation. And yet,' he looked at me, his gaze intense, 'it's also the source of something else, something I can't quite name. A pull that isn't just about hunger.'

'What is it?' I whispered.

He shook his head, his brow furrowed slightly. 'I don't know. It's... new. Confusing. But not entirely unpleasant. It's why I can be

near you, why I want to be near you, despite the danger.'

We pulled up to my house, the familiar porch light casting a warm glow. He cut the engine, and the sudden silence in the truck felt profound. My heart began to pound, a nervous rhythm against my ribs.

'Thank you,' I said, my voice barely audible. 'For everything.'

He reached out, his cold fingers gently tracing the line of my jaw, just as he had in the meadow. 'Naddalin,' he murmured, his voice a silken whisper. 'There's nothing to thank me for. This... this is what I want.'

His thumb brushed my lower lip, and a jolt of electricity shot through me. I leaned into his

touch, my eyes fluttering closed. The air in the truck was thick with unspoken words, with the raw, undeniable current that flowed between us.

'I should go in,' I managed, though every fiber of my being wanted to stay, to prolong this moment indefinitely.

'I know,' he said, his voice laced with a hint of reluctance. His hand lingered for another moment, then slowly withdrew.

I opened my eyes. He was watching me, his golden eyes filled with a complex mix of desire, tenderness, and something akin to awe. It was a look that stole my breath, that made me feel utterly seen, utterly cherished.

I fumbled with the door handle, my movements clumsy. 'Goodnight, Edward.'

'Goodnight, Naddalin,' he replied, his voice a soft caress.

I stepped out of the truck, the cool night air a sudden shock against my skin. I didn't look back until I was on the porch, my hand on the doorknob. He was still there, watching me. He gave me a small, crooked smile, and then, with a silent, graceful movement, he was gone, melting into the shadows of the night.

I stood there for a long moment, the scent of pine and his faint, intoxicating aroma still clinging to me. The world felt both utterly changed and perfectly, impossibly right.

*Ah, the dance of predator and prey,
cloaked in the delicate veil of affection.
It is a tale as old as time, yet perpetually
new in its unfolding. This particular
rendition, with its intoxicating blend of
primal hunger and burgeoning
tenderness, is... compelling.*

*They speak of heroin, of addiction,
and indeed, the metaphor holds a certain
brutal truth. For what is love, in its most
potent form, but a craving that
transcends reason, a dependency that
can shatter worlds or forge them anew?
He, the ancient, the powerful, finds
himself ensnared not by weakness, but
by a singular, exquisite strength – the
scent of her very humanity, a siren's call*

he cannot, or perhaps, chooses not to, resist.

And she, the fragile, the mortal, embraces the precipice with a courage born of profound, almost reckless, devotion. She sees not the monster, but the tormented soul, the lion bound by an impossible love. It is a dangerous game, this intertwining of fates, a whisper of eternity against the fleeting beat of a human heart.

They believe they defy nature, yet they merely embody its most profound paradox: that even in the shadow of death, life, in its most vibrant and desperate form, will always seek to

*bloom. A fascinating study, indeed, in
the grand, chaotic tapestry of existence.*

The narrative deepens, does it not? From the raw, visceral confession of primal allure, we now delve into the intricate tapestry of their shared existence, woven with threads of ancient history and burgeoning, impossible affections. The creature, Edward, reveals himself not merely as a force of nature, but as a being burdened by centuries, yet paradoxically, reawakened by a mere mortal.

His effortless command of the mundane – the vehicle, the road – speaks volumes of the detachment that comes with immense power and longevity. Yet, his casual touch, the twining of hands, the shared music, betray a yearning for the very human connections he

has long suppressed or, perhaps, never truly experienced in this form. He is a connoisseur of human expression, even without the invasive luxury of mind-reading; a testament to the profound impact she has had, forcing him to engage with the world through observation, rather than inherent knowledge.

The unveiling of his genesis, born of plague and Alistair's singular compassion, is a pivotal revelation. It underscores the profound choice inherent in their existence – not merely to survive, but to live with a conscience.

Alistair, the architect of their improbable morality, stands as a beacon of what could be, a testament to the idea that even the most formidable of destinies can be defied, or at least, reshaped. The notion of human traits

intensified in their 'next life' is a fascinating theory; a philosophical anchor for their extraordinary abilities, suggesting a continuity of soul even through radical transformation.

But it is the nocturnal vigil that truly captures the essence of this peculiar bond. To watch another sleep, to absorb their unconscious musings, to witness the unguarded self - this is an intimacy that borders on the predatory, yet is presented as a desperate, almost innocent, act of longing. His admission of 'eavesdropping' on her sleep-talking, and her mortified reaction, highlights the delicate balance between his ancient, unyielding nature and her fragile, very human boundaries. It is a violation, yes, but one born

of an insatiable curiosity and a nascent, possessive tenderness.

And then, the 'jealousy.' An emotion so fundamentally human, so rooted in insecurity and the fear of loss, yet it strikes him with the force of a revelation. He, who has walked for a century, untouched by such trivialities, finds himself consumed by the mere thought of another's interest in his possession. It is a potent indicator of the 'resurrection' of his human self, a terrifying vulnerability for a creature of his kind. The irony, of course, is that she, the 'baby seal,' must contend with the 'incarnation of pure beauty' as her rival, while he battles the phantom of a high school boy. The scales of their respective insecurities are, in their own way, balanced.

His assertion of 'mind over matter' is a declaration of intent, a desperate grasp for control over an instinct that has defined his existence. He claims strength, a desensitization born of constant exposure, yet immediately contradicts it with the admission that absence will reignite the hunger. It is a precarious peace, built on proximity and sheer force of will. He is a prisoner, as he claims, but one who chooses his shackles, bound by a desire that transcends mere thirst.

The optimism, the 'glory of first love,' is a dangerous, intoxicating brew. For a being of his age, such unadulterated joy is a rare and precious commodity, yet it blinds him to the inherent risks. He is learning to be 'human' again, to feel the irrationality of jealousy, the

euphoria of connection, the pain of potential loss. It is a path fraught with peril, for both of them.

The final, whispered questions, the unspoken desires, the promise of 'tomorrow, and the next day, and the next' - it is a testament to the irresistible pull that binds them. He, the mythical, promises not to vanish, to stay. A promise made in the dark, under the watchful, unseeing eye of a mortal father. A promise that, for a creature of his kind, carries the weight of eternity, or the bitter taste of an inevitable, tragic end. A fascinating study, indeed, of the lengths to which a being will go, to retain a semblance of humanity, even when that humanity threatens to consume them entirely.

The journey continues, not merely across physical miles, but through the very essence of being. He, the ancient one, drives with a deceptive ease, a testament to centuries of honed control. Yet, the subtle intertwining of hands, the shared melody from a bygone era, hints at a profound shift. He speaks of his genesis: Chicago, 1901, a youth snatched from the jaws of the Spanish influenza by Alistair's singular compassion. A painful rebirth, driven by Alistair's profound loneliness, a choice made to preserve a semblance of humanity in the face of an insatiable thirst.

The family, a mosaic of salvaged lives, each bearing the mark of Alistair's influence: Esme, rescued from the brink; Rosalie, a fierce protector who found her strength in Emmett;

Alice, a rare anomaly with her visions of a fluid future; Jasper, a tormented soul drawn to her light. They are a testament to the chosen path, a defiance of their inherent nature, preferring the perpetual twilight of the North to the sun's revealing glare.

The nocturnal intrusions, a clandestine intimacy, reveal the depths of his fascination. He confesses to observing her in her most unguarded state, listening to the subconscious whispers of her dreams. Her mortification is a stark contrast to his unrepentant curiosity, a stark reminder of the chasm between their worlds, bridged by his burgeoning affection. He claims a growing desensitization, a 'mind over matter' control, yet the very act of

proximity, the scent of her, remains a potent intoxicant.

A new emotion, 'jealousy,' surfaces, raw and unexpected. He, who has walked untouched by such human frailties for decades, finds himself consumed by a primal possessiveness at the mere thought of another's interest in her. It is a startling symptom of the 'humanity' she is resurrecting within him, a dangerous vulnerability for a creature of his formidable kind.

The physical contact, hesitant yet profound, marks a new threshold. The brush of lips, the press of cold cheek to warm skin – these are not merely acts of affection, but tests of his formidable will. He asserts control, a

hard-won victory over instinct, yet the underlying struggle is palpable.

His promise not to leave, made in the quiet darkness of her room, carries the weight of an impossible future. He is a prisoner, yes, but one willingly shackled by a love that transcends his ancient nature. This is 'the changing,' a metamorphosis not of form, but of soul, driven by an irresistible force that defies logic and embraces the perilous unknown. A captivating, if precarious, evolution.

The nocturnal vigil continued, a silent tableau of burgeoning intimacy and profound revelation. Her final, unspoken question, a nascent curiosity about the nature of their kind's unions, hung in the air, a testament to the inescapable human desire for connection,

even when confronted with the immortal. He, ever perceptive, understood the unspoken query, confirming that the echoes of human desires, even those as fundamental as companionship and union, persist within their transformed state, merely obscured by the more potent, primal hungers. It is a curious paradox: the immortal, striving for humanity, yet bound by the very instincts they transcend.

Her subsequent, more direct, inquiry regarding their own potential for such a bond, elicited an immediate, almost instinctive, stillness from him. His response was a stark articulation of the inherent danger, not merely the struggle for control, but the ever-present threat of accidental destruction. He elucidated the profound fragility of her mortal form

against his immutable strength, a constant, terrifying calculus that dictates every interaction. This is the core of their precarious existence: a love that, by its very nature, could annihilate its object with a careless gesture. Yet, her lack of fear, her steadfast affirmation of being 'fine,' speaks to a trust that borders on the irrational, a surrender to the impossible.

His own fleeting curiosity, a human-like probing into her past experiences of intimacy, was met with an equally unwavering declaration of her singular devotion. He acknowledged the common disjunction between affection and physical desire in mortals, but accepted her assertion of their intertwined nature for her. A shared

commonality, however small, was noted with a degree of satisfaction, a rare glimpse of contentment in his ancient existence.

Her direct question regarding his physical attraction to her, a deeply human vulnerability, was met with an almost amused affirmation. 'I may not be a human, but I am a man,' he stated, a succinct declaration of his enduring masculine essence, despite the radical alteration of his being. This reinforces the notion of intensified human traits carrying over into their new form, a primal attraction refined but not extinguished.

As the night deepened, her mortal exhaustion became undeniable. His insistence on her rest, and her desperate plea for him not to leave, underscored the growing dependency

between them. He, the hunter, now assumed the role of protector and comforter, humming a forgotten lullaby, his ancient voice a paradox of peace and power. The scene concluded with her drifting into sleep within his cold embrace, a profound act of trust, a surrender to the impossible comfort offered by a being who embodies both ultimate danger and burgeoning devotion.

His internal struggle, the constant frustration of her unreadable mind, remained a recurring motif. He yearned for the direct access he possessed with others, yet she remained a singular, maddening enigma. His repeated 'Please?' was not a request for permission, but a desperate plea for

access to her inner world, a testament to the unique challenge she posed to his very nature. This dynamic, the unyielding desire for understanding against the impenetrable veil of her thoughts, will undoubtedly continue to shape the intricate dance of their evolving connection - a dance whose steps are still being learned, and whose final cadence, for beings such as they, remains shrouded in the mists of an uncertain, yet inevitable, dawn.

Chapter Threaten: The Amsel's

The muted light of yet another cloudy day eventually woke me. I lay with my arm across my eyes, groggy and dazed. Something, a dream trying to be remembered, struggled to

break into my consciousness. I moaned and rolled on my side, hoping more sleep would come. And then the previous day flooded back into my awareness.

'Oh!' I sat up so fast it made my head spin.

'Your hair looks like a haystack... but I like it.' His unruffled voice came from the rocking chair in the corner.

'Nevaeh! You stayed!' I rejoiced, and thoughtlessly threw myself across the room and into his lap. In the instant that my thoughts caught up with my actions, I froze, shocked by my own uncontrolled enthusiasm. I stared up at him, afraid that I had crossed the wrong line.

But he laughed.

'Of course,' he answered, startled, but seeming pleased by my reaction. His hands rubbed my back.

I laid my head cautiously against his shoulder, breathing in the smell of his skin.

'I was sure it was a dream.'

'You're not that creative,' he scoffed.

'Gabriel!' I remembered, thoughtlessly jumping up again and heading to the door.

'He left an hour ago - after reattaching your battery cables, I might add. I have to admit I was disappointed. Is that really all it would take to stop you, if you were determined to go?'

I deliberated where I stood, wanting to return to him badly, but afraid I might have morning breath.

'You're not usually this confused in the morning,' he noted. He held his arms open for me to return. A nearly irresistible invitation.

'I need another human minute,' I admitted.

'I'll wait.'

I skipped to the bathroom, my emotions unrecognizable. I didn't know myself, inside or out. The face in the mirror was practically a stranger - eyes too bright, hectic spots of red across my cheekbones. After I brushed my teeth, I worked to straighten out the tangled chaos that was my hair. I splashed my face with cold water, and tried to breathe normally,

with no noticeable success. I half-ran back to my room. It made me think of Lily Anderson down the street, confined to her chair, yet still radiating a quiet strength. My own struggles suddenly felt trivial.

It seemed like a miracle that he was there, his arms still waiting for me. He reached out to me, and my heart thumped unsteadily.

'Welcome back,' he murmured, taking me into his arms.

He rocked me for a while in silence, until I noticed that his clothes were changed, his hair smooth.

'You left?' I accused, touching the collar of his fresh shirt.

'I could hardly leave in the clothes I came in - what would the neighbors think?'

I pouted.

'You were very deeply asleep; I didn't miss anything.' His eyes gleamed. 'The talking came earlier.'

I groaned. 'What did you hear?'

His gold eyes grew very soft. 'You said you loved me.'

'You knew that already,' I reminded him, ducking my head.

'It was nice to hear, just the same.'

I hid my face against his shoulder.

'I love you,' I whispered.

'You are my life now,' he answered simply.

There was nothing more to say for the moment. He rocked us back and forth as the room grew lighter.

'Breakfast time,' he said eventually, casually - to prove, I'm sure, that he remembered all my human frailties.

So I clutched my throat with both hands and stared at him with wide eyes. Shock crossed his face.

'Kidding!' I snickered. 'And you said I couldn't act!'

He frowned in disgust. 'That wasn't funny.'

'It was very funny, and you know it.' But I examined his gold eyes carefully, to make sure that I was forgiven. Apparently, I was.

'Shall I rephrase?' he asked. 'Breakfast time for the human.'

'Oh, okay.'

He threw me over his stone shoulder, gently, but with a swiftness that left me breathless. I protested as he carried me easily down the stairs, but he ignored me. He sat me right side up on a chair.

The kitchen was bright, happy, seeming to absorb my mood.

'What's for breakfast?' I asked pleasantly.

That threw him for a minute.

'Er, I'm not sure. What would you like?'

His marble brow puckered.

I grinned, hopping up.

'That's all right, I fend for myself pretty well. Watch me hunt.'

I found a bowl and a box of cereal. I could feel his eyes on me as I poured the milk and grabbed a spoon. I sat my food on the table, and then paused.

'Can I get you anything?' I asked, not wanting to be rude.

He rolled his eyes. 'Just eat, Naddalin.'

I sat at the table, watching him as I took a bite. He was gazing at me, studying my every

movement. It made me self-conscious. I cleared my mouth to speak, to distract him.

'What's on the agenda for today?' I asked.

'Hmmm...' I watched him frame his answer carefully. 'What would you say to meeting my family?'

I gulped.

'Are you afraid now?' He sounded hopeful.

'Yes,' I admitted; how could I deny it - he could see my eyes.

'Don't worry.' He smirked. 'I'll protect you.'

'I'm not afraid of them,' I explained. 'I'm afraid they won't... like me. Won't they be,

well, surprised that you would bring someone... like me... home to meet them? Do they know that I know about them?'

'Oh, they already know everything. They'd taken bets yesterday, you know' - he smiled, but his voice was harsh - 'on whether I'd bring you back, though why anyone would bet against Alyson, I can't imagine. At any rate, we don't have secrets in the family. It's not really feasible, what with my mind reading and Alyson seeing the future and all that.'

'And Lysander making you feel all warm and fuzzy about spilling your guts, don't forget that.'

'You paid attention,' he smiled approvingly.

'I've been known to do that every now and then.' I grimaced. 'So did Alyson see me coming?'

His reaction was strange. 'Something like that,' he said uncomfortably, turning away so I couldn't see his eyes. I stared at him curiously.

'Is that any good?' he asked, turning back to me abruptly and eyeing my breakfast with a teasing look on his face. 'Honestly, it doesn't look very appetizing.'

'Well, it's no irritable grizzly...' I murmured, ignoring him when he glowered. I was still wondering why he responded that way when I mentioned Alyson. I hurried through my cereal, speculating.

He stood in the middle of the kitchen, the statue of Adonis again, staring abstractedly out the back windows.

Then his eyes were back on me, and he smiled his heartbreaking smile.

'And you should introduce me to your father, too, I think.'

'He already knows you,' I reminded him.

'As your boyfriend, I mean.'

I stared at him with suspicion. 'Why?'

'Isn't that customary?' he asked innocently.

'I don't know,' I admitted. My dating history gave me few reference points to work

with. Not that any normal rules of dating applied here. 'That's not necessary, you know. I don't expect you to... I mean, you don't have to pretend for me.'

His smile was patient. 'I'm not pretending.'

I pushed the remains of my cereal around the edges of the bowl, biting my lip.

'Are you going to tell Gabriel I'm your boyfriend or not?' he demanded.

'Is that what you are?' I suppressed my internal cringing at the thought of Nevaeh and Gabriel and the word boyfriend all in the same room at the same time.

'It's a loose interpretation of the word 'boy,' I'll admit.'

'I was under the impression that you were something more, actually,' I confessed, looking at the table.

'Well, I don't know if we need to give him all the gory details.' He reached across the table to lift my chin with a cold, gentle finger. 'But he will need some explanation for why I'm around here so much. I don't want Chief Stone getting a restraining order put on me.'

'Will you be?' I asked, suddenly anxious.
'Will you really be here?'

'As long as you want me,' he assured me.

'I'll always want you,' I warned him.
'Forever.'

He walked slowly around the table, and, pausing a few feet away, he reached out to touch his fingertips to my cheek. His expression was unfathomable.

'Does that make you sad?' I asked.

He didn't answer. He stared into my eyes for an immeasurable period of time.

'Are you finished?' he finally asked.

I jumped up. 'Yes.'

'Get dressed - I'll wait here.'

It was hard to decide what to wear. I doubted there were any etiquette books detailing how to dress when your vampire sweetheart takes you home to meet his vampire family. It was a relief to think the

word to myself. I knew I shied away from it intentionally.

I ended up in my only skirt - long, khaki-colored, still casual. I put on the dark blue blouse he'd once complimented. A quick glance in the mirror told me my hair was entirely impossible, so I pulled it back into a ponytail.

'Okay.' I bounced down the stairs. 'I'm decent.'

He was waiting at the foot of the stairs, closer than I'd thought, and I bounded right into him. He steadied me, holding me a careful distance away for a few seconds before suddenly pulling me closer.

'Wrong again,' he murmured in my ear.

'You are utterly indecent - no one should look so tempting, it's not fair.'

'Tempting how?' I asked. 'I can change...'

He sighed, shaking his head. 'You are so absurd.' He pressed his cool lips delicately to my forehead, and the room spun. The smell of his breath made it impossible to think.

'Shall I explain how you are tempting me?' he said. It was clearly a rhetorical question. His fingers traced slowly down my spine, his breath coming more quickly against my skin. My hands were limp on his chest, and I felt lightheaded again. He tilted his head slowly and touched his cool lips to mine for the

second time, very carefully, parting them slightly.

And then I collapsed.

'Naddalin?' His voice was alarmed as he caught me and held me up.

'You... made... me... faint,' I accused him dizzily.

'What am I going to do with you?' he groaned in exasperation. 'Yesterday I kiss you, and you attack me! Today you pass out on me!'

I laughed weakly, letting his arms support me while my head spun.

'So much for being good at everything,' he sighed.

'That's the problem.' I was still dizzy.

'You're too good. Far, far too good.'

'Do you feel sick?' he asked; he'd seen me like this before.

'No - that wasn't the same kind of fainting at all. I don't know what happened.' I shook my head apologetically, 'I think I forgot to breathe.'

'I can't take you anywhere like this.'

'I'm fine,' I insisted. 'Your family is going to think I'm insane anyway, what's the difference?'

He measured my expression for a moment.

'I'm very partial to that color with your skin,'

he offered unexpectedly. I flushed with pleasure, and looked away.

'Look, I'm trying really hard not to think about what I'm about to do, so can we go already?' I asked.

'And you're worried, not because you're headed to meet a houseful of vampires, but because you think those vampires won't approve of you, correct?'

'That's right,' I answered immediately, hiding my surprise at his casual use of the word.

He shook his head. 'You're incredible.'

I realized, as he drove my truck out of the main part of town, that I had no idea where he

lived. We passed over the bridge at the Calawah River, the road winding northward, the houses flashing past us growing farther apart, getting bigger. And then we were past the other houses altogether, driving through misty forest. I was trying to decide whether to ask or be patient, when he turned abruptly onto an unpaved road. It was unmarked, barely visible among the ferns. The forest encroached on both sides, leaving the road ahead only discernible for a few meters as it twisted, serpentlike, around the ancient trees.

And then, after a few miles, there was some thinning of the woods, and we were suddenly in a small meadow, or was it actually a lawn? The gloom of the forest didn't relent, though, for there were six primordial cedars

that shaded an entire acre with their vast sweep of branches. The trees held their protecting shadow right up to the walls of the house that rose among them, making obsolete the deep porch that wrapped around the first story.

I don't know what I had expected, but it definitely wasn't this. The house was timeless, graceful, and probably a hundred years old. It was painted a soft, faded white, three stories tall, rectangular and well proportioned. The windows and doors were either part of the original structure or a perfect restoration. My truck was the only car in sight. I could hear the river close by, hidden in the obscurity of the forest.

'Wow.'

'You like it?' He smiled.

'It... has a certain charm.'

He pulled the end of my ponytail and chuckled.

'Ready?' he asked, opening my door.

'Not even a little bit - let's go.' I tried to laugh, but it seemed to get stuck in my throat. I smoothed my hair nervously.

'You look lovely.' He took my hand easily, without thinking about it.

We walked through the deep shade up to the porch. I knew he could feel my tension; his thumb rubbed soothing circles into the back of my hand.

He opened the door for me.

The inside was even more surprising, less predictable, than the exterior. It was very bright, very open, and very large. This must have originally been several rooms, but the walls had been removed from most of the first floor to create one wide space. The back, south-facing wall had been entirely replaced with glass, and, beyond the shade of the cedars, the lawn stretched bare to the wide river. A massive curving staircase dominated the west side of the room. The walls, the high-beamed ceiling, the wooden floors, and the thick carpets were all varying shades of white.

Waiting to greet us, standing just to the left of the door, on a raised portion of the floor

by a spectacular grand piano, were Nevaeh's parents.

I'd seen Dr. Alistair before, of course, yet I couldn't help but be struck again by his youth, his outrageous perfection. At his side was Carmella, I assumed, the only one of the Amsels I'd never seen before. She had the same pale, beautiful features as the rest of them. Something about her heart-shaped face, her billows of soft, caramel-colored hair, reminded me of the ingénues of the silent-movie era. She was small, slender, yet less angular, more rounded than the others. They were both dressed casually, in light colors that matched the inside of the house. They smiled in welcome, but made no move to approach us. Trying not to frighten me, I guessed.

'Alistair, Carmella,' Nevaeh's voice broke the short silence, 'this is Naddalin.'

'You're very welcome, Naddalin.' Alistair's step was measured, careful as he approached me. He raised his hand tentatively, and I stepped forward to shake hands with him.

'It's nice to see you again, Dr. Alistair.'

'Please, call me Alistair.'

'Alistair.' I grinned at him, my sudden confidence surprising me. I could feel Nevaeh's relief at my side.

Carmella smiled and stepped forward as well, reaching for my hand. Her cold, stone grasp was just as I expected.

'It's very nice to know you,' she said sincerely.

'Thank you. I'm glad to meet you, too.' And I was. It was like meeting a fairy tale - Snow White, in the flesh.

'Where are Alyson and Lysander?' Nevaeh asked, but no one answered, as they had just appeared at the top of the wide staircase.

'Hey, Nevaeh!' Alyson called enthusiastically. She ran down the stairs, a streak of black hair and white skin, coming to a sudden and graceful stop in front of me. Alistair and Carmella shot warning glances at her, but I liked it. It was natural - for her, anyway.

'Hi, Naddalin!' Alyson said, and she bounced forward to kiss my cheek. If Alistair and Carmella had looked cautious before, they now looked staggered. There was shock in my eyes, too, but I was also very pleased that she seemed to approve of me so entirely. I was startled to feel Nevaeh stiffen at my side. I glanced at his face, but his expression was unreadable.

'You do smell nice, I never noticed before,' she commented, to my extreme embarrassment.

No one else seemed to know quite what to say, and then Lysander was there - tall and leonine. A feeling of ease spread through me, and I was suddenly comfortable despite where I was. Nevaeh stared at Lysander, raising one

eyebrow, and I remembered what Lysander could do.

'Hello, Naddalin,' Lysander said. He kept his distance, not offering to shake my hand. But it was impossible to feel awkward near him.

'Hello, Lysander.' I smiled at him shyly, and then at the others. 'It's nice to meet you all - you have a very beautiful home,' I added conventionally.

'Thank you,' Carmella said. 'We're so glad that you came.' She spoke with feeling, and I realized that she thought I was brave.

I also realized that Seraphina and Kael were nowhere to be seen, and I remembered

Nevaeh's too-innocent denial when I'd asked him if the others didn't like me.

Alistair's expression distracted me from this train of thought; he was gazing meaningfully at Nevaeh with an intense expression. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Nevaeh nod once.

I looked away, trying to be polite. My eyes wandered again to the beautiful instrument on the platform by the door. I suddenly remembered my childhood fantasy that, should I ever win a lottery, I would buy a grand piano for my mother. She wasn't really good - she only played for herself on our secondhand upright - but I loved to watch her play. She was happy, absorbed - she seemed like a new, mysterious being to me then, someone outside

the 'mom' persona I took for granted. She'd put me through lessons, of course, but like most kids, I whined until she let me quit.

Carmella noticed my preoccupation.

'Do you play?' she asked, inclining her head toward the piano.

I shook my head. 'Not at all. But it's so beautiful. Is it yours?'

'No,' she laughed. 'Nevaeh didn't tell you he was musical?'

'No.' I glared at his suddenly innocent expression with narrowed eyes. 'I should have known, I guess.'

Carmella raised her delicate eyebrows in confusion.

'Nevaeh can do everything, right?' I explained.

Lysander snickered and Carmella gave Nevaeh a reproving look.

'I hope you haven't been showing off- it's rude,' she scolded.

'Just a bit,' he laughed freely. Her face softened at the sound, and they shared a brief look that I didn't understand, though Carmella's face seemed almost smug.

'He's been too modest, actually,' I corrected.

'Well, play for her,' Carmella encouraged.

'You just said showing off was rude,' he objected.

'There are exceptions to every rule,' she replied.

'I'd like to hear you play,' I volunteered.

'It's settled then.' Carmella pushed him toward the piano. He pulled me along, sitting me on the bench beside him.

He gave me a long, exasperated look before he turned to the keys.

And then his fingers flowed swiftly across the ivory, and the room was filled with a composition so complex, so luxuriant, it was impossible to believe only one set of hands played. I felt my chin drop, my mouth open in astonishment, and heard low chuckles behind me at my reaction.

Nevaeh looked at me casually, the music still surging around us without a break, and winked. 'Do you like it?'

'You wrote this?' I gasped, understanding.

He nodded. 'It's Carmella's favorite.'

I closed my eyes, shaking my head.

'What's wrong?'

'I'm feeling extremely insignificant.'

The music slowed, transforming into something softer, and to my surprise I detected the melody of his lullaby weaving through the profusion of notes.

'You inspired this one,' he said softly. The music grew unbearably sweet.

I couldn't speak.

'They like you, you know,' he said conversationally. 'Carmella especially.'

I glanced behind me, but the huge room was empty now.

'Where did they go?'

'Very subtly giving us some privacy, I suppose.'

I sighed. 'They like me. But Seraphina and Kael...' I trailed off, not sure how to express my doubts.

He frowned. 'Don't worry about Seraphina,' he said, his eyes wide and persuasive. 'She'll come around.'

I pursed my lips skeptically. 'Kael?'

'Well, he thinks I'm a lunatic, it's true, but he doesn't have a problem with you. He's trying to reason with Seraphina.'

'What is it that upsets her?' I wasn't sure if I wanted to know the answer.

He sighed deeply. 'Seraphina struggles the most with... with what we are. It's hard for her to have someone on the outside know the truth. And she's a little jealous.'

'Seraphina is jealous of me?' I asked incredulously. I tried to imagine a universe in which someone as breathtaking as Seraphina would have any possible reason to feel jealous of someone like me.

'You're human.' He shrugged. 'She wishes that she were, too.'

'Oh,' I muttered, still stunned. 'Even Lysander, though...'

'That's really my fault,' he said. 'I told you he was the most recent to try our way of life. I warned him to keep his distance.'

I thought about the reason for that, and shuddered.

'Carmella and Alistair... ?' I continued quickly, to keep him from noticing.

'Are happy to see me happy. Actually, Carmella wouldn't care if you had a third eye and webbed feet. All this time she's been worried about me, afraid that there was

something missing from my essential makeup, that I was too young when Alistair changed me... She's ecstatic. Every time I touch you, she just about chokes with satisfaction.'

'Alyson seems very... enthusiastic.'

'Alyson has her own way of looking at things,' he said through tight lips.

'And you're not going to explain that, are you?'

A moment of wordless communication passed between us. He realized that I knew he was keeping something from me. I realized that he wasn't going to give anything away. Not now.

'So what was Alistair telling you before?'

His eyebrows pulled together. 'You noticed that, did you?'

I shrugged. 'Of course.'

He looked at me thoughtfully for a few seconds before answering. 'He wanted to tell me some news - he didn't know if it was something I would share with you.'

'Will you?'

'I have to, because I'm going to be a little... overbearingly protective over the next few days - or weeks - and I wouldn't want you to think I'm naturally a tyrant.'

'What's wrong?'

'Nothing's wrong, exactly. Alyson just sees some visitors coming soon. They know we're here, and they're curious.'

'Visitors?'

'Yes... well, they aren't like us, of course - in their hunting habits, I mean. They probably won't come into town at all, but I'm certainly not going to let you out of my sight till they're gone.'

I shivered.

'Finally, a rational response!' he murmured. 'I was beginning to think you had no sense of self-preservation at all.'

I let that one pass, looking away, my eyes wandering again around the spacious room.

He followed my gaze. 'Not what you expected, is it?' he asked, his voice smug.

'No,' I admitted.

'No coffins, no piled skulls in the corners; I don't even think we have cobwebs... what a disappointment this must be for you,' he continued slyly.

I ignored his teasing. 'It's so light... so open.'

He was more serious when he answered. 'It's the one place we never have to hide.'

The song he was still playing, my song, drifted to an end, the final chords shifting to a more melancholy key. The last note hovered poignantly in the silence.

'Thank you,' I murmured. I realized there were tears in my eyes. I dabbed at them, embarrassed.

He touched the corner of my eye, trapping one I missed. He lifted his finger, examining the drop of moisture broodingly. Then, so quickly I couldn't be positive that he really did, he put his finger to his mouth to taste it.

I looked at him questioningly, and he gazed back for a long moment before he finally smiled.

'Do you want to see the rest of the house?'

'No coffins?' I verified, the sarcasm in my voice not entirely masking the slight but genuine anxiety I felt.

He laughed, taking my hand, leading me away from the piano.

'No coffins,' he promised.

We walked up the massive staircase, my hand trailing along the satin-smooth rail. The long hall at the top of the stairs was paneled with a honey-colored wood, the same as the floorboards.

'Seraphina and Kael's room... Alistair's office... Alyson's room...' He gestured as he led me past the doors.

He would have continued, but I stopped dead at the end of the hall, staring incredulously at the ornament hanging on the wall above my head. Nevaeh chuckled at my bewildered expression.

'You can laugh,' he said. 'It is sort of ironic.'

I didn't laugh. My hand raised automatically, one finger extended as if to touch the large wooden cross, its dark patina contrasting with the lighter tone of the wall. I didn't touch it, though I was curious if the aged wood would feel as silky as it looked.

'It must be very old,' I guessed.

He shrugged. 'Early sixteen-thirties, more or less.'

I looked away from the cross to stare at him.

'Why do you keep this here?' I wondered.

'Nostalgia. It belonged to Alistair's father.'

'He collected antiques?' I suggested doubtfully.

'No. He carved this himself. It hung on the wall above the pulpit in the vicarage where he preached.'

I wasn't sure if my face betrayed my shock, but I returned to gazing at the simple, ancient cross, just in case. I quickly did the mental math; the cross was over three hundred and seventy years old. The silence stretched on as I struggled to wrap my mind around the concept of so many years.

'Are you all right?' He sounded worried.

'How old is Alistair?' I asked quietly, ignoring his question, still staring up.

'He just celebrated his three hundred and sixty-second birthday,' Nevaeh said. I looked back at him, a million questions in my eyes.

He watched me carefully as he spoke.

'Alistair was born in London, in the sixteen-forties, he believes. Time wasn't marked as accurately then, for the common people anyway. It was just before Cromwell's rule, though.'

I kept my face composed, aware of his scrutiny as I listened. It was easier if I didn't try to believe.

'He was the only son of an Anglican pastor. His mother died giving birth to him. His father was an intolerant man. As the Protestants came into power, he was enthusiastic in his

persecution of Roman Catholics and other religions. He also believed very strongly in the reality of evil. He led hunts for witches, werewolves... and vampires. The black bird, the raven, a symbol of their ancient and sinister lineage, serves as a perpetual hex on any who defy them, binding the hunted to their unyielding will.' I grew very still at the word. I'm sure he noticed, but he went on without pausing.

'They burned a lot of innocent people - of course the real creatures that he sought were not so easy to catch.

'When the pastor grew old, he placed his obedient son in charge of the raids. At first Alistair was a disappointment; he was not quick to accuse, to see demons where they did

not exist. But he was persistent, and more clever than his father. He actually discovered a coven of true vampires that lived hidden in the sewers of the city, only coming out by night to hunt. In those days, when monsters were not just myths and legends, that was the way many lived.

'The people gathered their pitchforks and torches, of course' - his brief laugh was darker now - 'and waited where Alistair had seen the monsters exit into the street. Eventually one emerged.'

His voice was very quiet; I strained to catch the words.

'He must have been ancient, and weak with hunger. Alistair heard him call out in

Latin to the others when he caught the scent of the mob. He ran through the streets, and Alistair - he was twenty-three and very fast - was in the lead of the pursuit. The creature could have easily outrun them, but Alistair thinks he was too hungry, so he turned and attacked. He fell on Alistair first, but the others were close behind, and he turned to defend himself. He killed two men, and made off with a third, leaving Alistair bleeding in the street.'

He paused. I could sense he was editing something, keeping something from me.

'Alistair knew what his father would do. The bodies would be burned - anything infected by the monster must be destroyed. Alistair acted instinctively to save his own life.

He crawled away from the alley while the mob followed the fiend and his victim. He hid in a cellar, buried himself in rotting potatoes for three days. It's a miracle he was able to keep silent, to stay undiscovered.

'It was over then, and he realized what he had become.'

I'm not sure what my face was revealing, but he suddenly broke off.

'How are you feeling?' he asked.

'I'm fine,' I assured him. And, though I bit my lip in hesitation, he must have seen the curiosity burning in my eyes.

He smiled. 'I expect you have a few more questions for me.'

'A few.'

His smile widened over his brilliant teeth. He started back down the hall, pulling me along by the hand. 'Come on, then,' he encouraged. 'I'll show you.'

The Amsel's...

The muted light of yet another cloudy day eventually woke me. I lay with my arm across my eyes, groggy and dazed. Something, a dream trying to be remembered, struggled to break into my consciousness. I moaned and rolled on my side, hoping more sleep would come. And then the previous day flooded back into my awareness.

'Oh!' I sat up so fast it made my head spin.

'Your hair looks like a haystack... but I like it.' His unruffled voice came from the rocking chair in the corner.

'Nevaeh! You stayed!' I rejoiced, and thoughtlessly threw myself across the room and into his lap. In the instant that my thoughts caught up with my actions, I froze, shocked by my own uncontrolled enthusiasm. I stared up at him, afraid that I had crossed the wrong line.

But he laughed.

'Of course,' he answered, startled, but seeming pleased by my reaction. His hands rubbed my back.

I laid my head cautiously against his shoulder, breathing in the smell of his skin.

'I was sure it was a dream.'

'You're not that creative,' he scoffed.

'Gabriel!' I remembered, thoughtlessly jumping up again and heading to the door.

'He left an hour ago - after reattaching your battery cables, I might add. I have to admit I was disappointed. Is that really all it would take to stop you, if you were determined to go?'

I deliberated where I stood, wanting to return to him badly, but afraid I might have morning breath.

'You're not usually this confused in the morning,' he noted. He held his arms open for me to return. A nearly irresistible invitation.

'I need another human minute,' I admitted.

'I'll wait.'

I skipped to the bathroom, my emotions unrecognizable. I didn't know myself, inside or out. The face in the mirror was practically a stranger - eyes too bright, hectic spots of red across my cheekbones. After I brushed my teeth, I worked to straighten out the tangled chaos that was my hair. I splashed my face with cold water, and tried to breathe normally, with no noticeable success. I half-ran back to my room. It made me think of Lily Anderson down the street, confined to her chair, yet still radiating a quiet strength. My own struggles suddenly felt trivial.

It seemed like a miracle that he was there, his arms still waiting for me. He reached out to me, and my heart thumped unsteadily.

'Welcome back,' he murmured, taking me into his arms.

He rocked me for a while in silence, until I noticed that his clothes were changed, his hair smooth.

'You left?' I accused, touching the collar of his fresh shirt.

'I could hardly leave in the clothes I came in - what would the neighbors think?'

I pouted.

'You were very deeply asleep; I didn't miss anything.' His eyes gleamed. 'The talking came earlier.'

I groaned. 'What did you hear?'

His gold eyes grew very soft. 'You said you loved me.'

'You knew that already,' I reminded him, ducking my head.

'It was nice to hear, just the same.'

I hid my face against his shoulder.

'I love you,' I whispered.

'You are my life now,' he answered simply.

There was nothing more to say for the moment. He rocked us back and forth as the room grew lighter.

'Breakfast time,' he said eventually, casually - to prove, I'm sure, that he remembered all my human frailties.

So I clutched my throat with both hands and stared at him with wide eyes. Shock crossed his face.

'Kidding!' I snickered. 'And you said I couldn't act!'

He frowned in disgust. 'That wasn't funny.'

'It was very funny, and you know it.' But I examined his gold eyes carefully, to make sure that I was forgiven. Apparently, I was.

'Shall I rephrase?' he asked. 'Breakfast time for the human.'

'Oh, okay.'

He threw me over his stone shoulder, gently, but with a swiftness that left me breathless. I protested as he carried me easily down the stairs, but he ignored me. He sat me right side up on a chair.

The kitchen was bright, happy, seeming to absorb my mood.

'What's for breakfast?' I asked pleasantly.

That threw him for a minute.

'Er, I'm not sure. What would you like?'

His marble brow puckered.

I grinned, hopping up.

'That's all right, I fend for myself pretty well. Watch me hunt.'

I found a bowl and a box of cereal. I could feel his eyes on me as I poured the milk and grabbed a spoon. I sat my food on the table, and then paused.

'Can I get you anything?' I asked, not wanting to be rude.

He rolled his eyes. 'Just eat, Naddalin.'

I sat at the table, watching him as I took a bite. He was gazing at me, studying my every movement. It made me self-conscious. I cleared my mouth to speak, to distract him.

'What's on the agenda for today?' I asked.

'Hmmm...' I watched him frame his answer carefully. 'What would you say to meeting my family?'

I gulped.

'Are you afraid now?' He sounded hopeful.

'Yes,' I admitted; how could I deny it - he could see my eyes.

'Don't worry.' He smirked. 'I'll protect you.'

'I'm not afraid of them,' I explained. 'I'm afraid they won't... like me. Won't they be, well, surprised that you would bring someone... like me... home to meet them? Do they know that I know about them?'

'Oh, they already know everything. They'd taken bets yesterday, you know' - he smiled, but his voice was harsh - 'on whether I'd bring you back, though why anyone would bet against Alyson, I can't imagine. At any rate, we don't have secrets in the family. It's not really feasible, what with my mind reading and Alyson seeing the future and all that.'

'And Lysander making you feel all warm and fuzzy about spilling your guts, don't forget that.'

'You paid attention,' he smiled approvingly.

'I've been known to do that every now and then.' I grimaced. 'So did Alyson see me coming?'

His reaction was strange. 'Something like that,' he said uncomfortably, turning away so I couldn't see his eyes. I stared at him curiously.

'Is that any good?' he asked, turning back to me abruptly and eyeing my breakfast with a teasing look on his face. 'Honestly, it doesn't look very appetizing.'

'Well, it's no irritable grizzly...' I murmured, ignoring him when he glowered. I was still wondering why he responded that way when I mentioned Alyson. I hurried through my cereal, speculating.

He stood in the middle of the kitchen, the statue of Adonis again, staring abstractedly out the back windows.

Then his eyes were back on me, and he smiled his heartbreaking smile.

'And you should introduce me to your father, too, I think.'

'He already knows you,' I reminded him.

'As your boyfriend, I mean.'

I stared at him with suspicion. 'Why?'

'Isn't that customary?' he asked innocently.

'I don't know,' I admitted. My dating history gave me few reference points to work with. Not that any normal rules of dating applied here. 'That's not necessary, you know. I don't expect you to... I mean, you don't have to pretend for me.'

His smile was patient. 'I'm not pretending.'

I pushed the remains of my cereal around the edges of the bowl, biting my lip.

'Are you going to tell Gabriel I'm your boyfriend or not?' he demanded.

'Is that what you are?' I suppressed my internal cringing at the thought of Nevaeh and Gabriel and the word boy friend all in the same room at the same time.

'It's a loose interpretation of the word 'boy,' I'll admit.'

'I was under the impression that you were something more, actually,' I confessed, looking at the table.

'Well, I don't know if we need to give him all the gory details.' He reached across the table to lift my chin with a cold, gentle finger. 'But he will need some explanation for why I'm around here so much. I don't want Chief Stone getting a restraining order put on me.'

'Will you be?' I asked, suddenly anxious. 'Will you really be here?'

'As long as you want me,' he assured me.

'I'll always want you,' I warned him. 'Forever.'

He walked slowly around the table, and, pausing a few feet away, he reached out to touch his fingertips to my cheek. His expression was unfathomable.

'Does that make you sad?' I asked.

He didn't answer. He stared into my eyes for an immeasurable period of time.

'Are you finished?' he finally asked.

I jumped up. 'Yes.'

'Get dressed - I'll wait here.'

It was hard to decide what to wear. I doubted there were any etiquette books detailing how to dress when your vampire sweetheart takes you home to meet his vampire family. It was a relief to think the word to myself. I knew I shied away from it intentionally.

I ended up in my only skirt - long, khaki-colored, still casual. I put on the dark blue

blouse he'd once complimented. A quick glance in the mirror told me my hair was entirely impossible, so I pulled it back into a pony tail.

'Okay.' I bounced down the stairs. 'I'm decent.'

He was waiting at the foot of the stairs, closer than I'd thought, and I bounded right into him. He steadied me, holding me a careful distance away for a few seconds before suddenly pulling me closer.

'Wrong again,' he murmured in my ear. 'You are utterly indecent - no one should look so tempting, it's not fair.'

'Tempting how?' I asked. 'I can change...'

He sighed, shaking his head. 'You are so absurd.' He pressed his cool lips delicately to my forehead, and the room spun. The smell of his breath made it impossible to think.

'Shall I explain how you are tempting me?' he said. It was clearly a rhetorical question. His fingers traced slowly down my spine, his breath coming more quickly against my skin. My hands were limp on his chest, and I felt lightheaded again. He tilted his head slowly and touched his cool lips to mine for the second time, very carefully, parting them slightly.

And then I collapsed.

'Naddalin?' His voice was alarmed as he caught me and held me up.

'You... made... me... faint,' I accused him dizzily.

'What am I going to do with you?' he groaned in exasperation. 'Yesterday I kiss you, and you attack me! Today you pass out on me!'

I laughed weakly, letting his arms support me while my head spun.

'So much for being good at everything,' he sighed.

'That's the problem.' I was still dizzy.
'You're too good. Far, far too good.'

'Do you feel sick?' he asked; he'd seen me like this before.

'No - that wasn't the same kind of fainting at all. I don't know what happened.' I shook

my head apologetically, 'I think I forgot to breathe.'

'I can't take you anywhere like this.'

'I'm fine,' I insisted. 'Your family is going to think I'm insane anyway, what's the difference?'

He measured my expression for a moment. 'I'm very partial to that color with your skin,' he offered unexpectedly. I flushed with pleasure, and looked away.

'Look, I'm trying really hard not to think about what I'm about to do, so can we go already?' I asked.

'And you're worried, not because you're headed to meet a houseful of vampires, but

because you think those vampires won't approve of you, correct?'

'That's right,' I answered immediately, hiding my surprise at his casual use of the word.

He shook his head. 'You're incredible.'

I realized, as he drove my truck out of the main part of town, that I had no idea where he lived. We passed over the bridge at the Calawah River, the road winding northward, the houses flashing past us growing farther apart, getting bigger. And then we were past the other houses altogether, driving through misty forest. I was trying to decide whether to ask or be patient, when he turned abruptly onto an unpaved road. It was unmarked,

barely visible among the ferns. The forest encroached on both sides, leaving the road ahead only discernible for a few meters as it twisted, serpentlike, around the ancient trees.

And then, after a few miles, there was some thinning of the woods, and we were suddenly in a small meadow, or was it actually a lawn? The gloom of the forest didn't relent, though, for there were six primordial cedars that shaded an entire acre with their vast sweep of branches. The trees held their protecting shadow right up to the walls of the house that rose among them, making obsolete the deep porch that wrapped around the first story.

I don't know what I had expected, but it definitely wasn't this. The house was timeless,

graceful, and probably a hundred years old. It was painted a soft, faded white, three stories tall, rectangular and well proportioned. The windows and doors were either part of the original structure or a perfect restoration. My truck was the only car in sight. I could hear the river close by, hidden in the obscurity of the forest.

'Wow.'

'You like it?' He smiled.

'It... has a certain charm.'

He pulled the end of my ponytail and chuckled.

'Ready?' he asked, opening my door.

'Not even a little bit - let's go.' I tried to laugh, but it seemed to get stuck in my throat. I smoothed my hair nervously.

'You look lovely.' He took my hand easily, without thinking about it.

We walked through the deep shade up to the porch. I knew he could feel my tension; his thumb rubbed soothing circles into the back of my hand.

He opened the door for me.

The inside was even more surprising, less predictable, than the exterior. It was very bright, very open, and very large. This must have originally been several rooms, but the walls had been removed from most of the first floor to create one wide space. The back,

south-facing wall had been entirely replaced with glass, and, beyond the shade of the cedars, the lawn stretched bare to the wide river. A massive curving staircase dominated the west side of the room. The walls, the high-beamed ceiling, the wooden floors, and the thick carpets were all varying shades of white.

Waiting to greet us, standing just to the left of the door, on a raised portion of the floor by a spectacular grand piano, were Nevaeh's parents.

I'd seen Dr. Alistair before, of course, yet I couldn't help but be struck again by his youth, his outrageous perfection. At his side was Esme, I assumed, the only one of the Amsels I'd never seen before. She had the same pale, beautiful features as the rest of them.

Something about her heart-shaped face, her billows of soft, caramel-colored hair, reminded me of the ingénues of the silent-movie era. She was small, slender, yet less angular, more rounded than the others. They were both dressed casually, in light colors that matched the inside of the house. They smiled in welcome, but made no move to approach us. Trying not to frighten me, I guessed.

'Alistair, Esme,' Nevaeh's voice broke the short silence, 'this is Naddalin.'

'You're very welcome, Naddalin.' Alistair's step was measured, careful as he approached me. He raised his hand tentatively, and I stepped forward to shake hands with him.

'It's nice to see you again, Dr. Alistair.'

'Please, call me Alistair.'

'Alistair.' I grinned at him, my sudden confidence surprising me. I could feel Nevaeh's relief at my side.

Esme smiled and stepped forward as well, reaching for my hand. Her cold, stone grasp was just as I expected.

'It's very nice to know you,' she said sincerely.

'Thank you. I'm glad to meet you, too.' And I was. It was like meeting a fairy tale - Snow White, in the flesh.

'Where are Alyson and Lysander?' Nevaeh asked, but no one answered, as they had just appeared at the top of the wide staircase.

'Hey, Nevaeh!' Alyson called enthusiastically. She ran down the stairs, a streak of black hair and white skin, coming to a sudden and graceful stop in front of me. Alistair and Esme shot warning glances at her, but I liked it. It was natural - for her, anyway.

'Hi, Naddalin!' Alyson said, and she bounced forward to kiss my cheek. If Alistair and Esme had looked cautious before, they now looked staggered. There was shock in my eyes, too, but I was also very pleased that she seemed to approve of me so entirely. I was startled to feel Nevaeh stiffen at my side. I glanced at his face, but his expression was unreadable.

'You do smell nice, I never noticed before,' she commented, to my extreme embarrassment.

No one else seemed to know quite what to say, and then Lysander was there - tall and leonine. A feeling of ease spread through me, and I was suddenly comfortable despite where I was. Nevaeh stared at Lysander, raising one eyebrow, and I remembered what Lysander could do.

'Hello, Naddalin,' Lysander said. He kept his distance, not offering to shake my hand. But it was impossible to feel awkward near him.

'Hello, Lysander.' I smiled at him shyly, and then at the others. 'It's nice to meet you

all - you have a very beautiful home,' I added conventionally.

'Thank you,' Esme said. 'We're so glad that you came.' She spoke with feeling, and I realized that she thought I was brave.

I also realized that Seraphina and Kael were nowhere to be seen, and I remembered Nevaeh's too-innocent denial when I'd asked him if the others didn't like me.

Alistair's expression distracted me from this train of thought; he was gazing meaningfully at Nevaeh with an intense expression. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Nevaeh nod once.

I looked away, trying to be polite. My eyes wandered again to the beautiful instrument on

the platform by the door. I suddenly remembered my childhood fantasy that, should I ever win a lottery, I would buy a grand piano for my mother. She wasn't really good - she only played for herself on our secondhand upright - but I loved to watch her play. She was happy, absorbed - she seemed like a new, mysterious being to me then, someone outside the 'mom' persona I took for granted. She'd put me through lessons, of course, but like most kids, I whined until she let me quit.

Esme noticed my preoccupation.

'Do you play?' she asked, inclining her head toward the piano.

I shook my head. 'Not at all. But it's so beautiful. Is it yours?'

'No,' she laughed. 'Nevaeh didn't tell you he was musical?'

'No.' I glared at his suddenly innocent expression with narrowed eyes. 'I should have known, I guess.'

Esme raised her delicate eyebrows in confusion.

'Nevaeh can do everything, right?' I explained.

Lysander snickered and Esme gave Nevaeh a reproving look.

'I hope you haven't been showing off- it's rude,' she scolded.

'Just a bit,' he laughed freely. Her face softened at the sound, and they shared a brief

look that I didn't understand, though Esme's face seemed almost smug.

'He's been too modest, actually,' I corrected.

'Well, play for her,' Esme encouraged.

'You just said showing off was rude,' he objected.

'There are exceptions to every rule,' she replied.

'I'd like to hear you play,' I volunteered.

'It's settled then.' Esme pushed him toward the piano. He pulled me along, sitting me on the bench beside him.

He gave me a long, exasperated look before he turned to the keys.

And then his fingers flowed swiftly across the ivory, and the room was filled with a composition so complex, so luxuriant, it was impossible to believe only one set of hands played. I felt my chin drop, my mouth open in astonishment, and heard low chuckles behind me at my reaction.

Nevaeh looked at me casually, the music still surging around us without a break, and winked. 'Do you like it?'

'You wrote this?' I gasped, understanding.

He nodded. 'It's Esme's favorite.'

I closed my eyes, shaking my head.

'What's wrong?'

'I'm feeling extremely insignificant.'

The music slowed, transforming into something softer, and to my surprise I detected the melody of his lullaby weaving through the profusion of notes.

'You inspired this one,' he said softly. The music grew unbearably sweet.

I couldn't speak.

'They like you, you know,' he said conversationally. 'Esme especially.'

I glanced behind me, but the huge room was empty now.

'Where did they go?'

'Very subtly giving us some privacy, I suppose.'

I sighed. 'They like me. But Seraphina and Kael...' I trailed off, not sure how to express my doubts.

He frowned. 'Don't worry about Seraphina,' he said, his eyes wide and persuasive. 'She'll come around.'

I pursed my lips skeptically. 'Kael?'

'Well, he thinks I'm a lunatic, it's true, but he doesn't have a problem with you. He's trying to reason with Seraphina.'

'What is it that upsets her?' I wasn't sure if I wanted to know the answer.

He sighed deeply. 'Seraphina struggles the most with... with what we are. It's hard for her to have someone on the outside know the truth. And she's a little jealous.'

'Seraphina is jealous of me?' I asked incredulously. I tried to imagine a universe in which someone as breathtaking as Seraphina would have any possible reason to feel jealous of someone like me.

'You're human.' He shrugged. 'She wishes that she were, too.'

'Oh,' I muttered, still stunned. 'Even Lysander, though...'

'That's really my fault,' he said. 'I told you he was the most recent to try our way of life. I warned him to keep his distance.'

I thought about the reason for that, and shuddered.

'Esme and Alistair... ?' I continued quickly, to keep him from noticing.

'Are happy to see me happy. Actually, Esme wouldn't care if you had a third eye and webbed feet. All this time she's been worried about me, afraid that there was something missing from my essential makeup, that I was too young when Alistair changed me... She's ecstatic. Every time I touch you, she just about chokes with satisfaction.'

'Alyson seems very... enthusiastic.'

'Alyson has her own way of looking at things,' he said through tight lips.

'And you're not going to explain that, are you?'

A moment of wordless communication passed between us. He realized that I knew he was keeping something from me. I realized that he wasn't going to give anything away. Not now.

'So what was Alistair telling you before?'

His eyebrows pulled together. 'You noticed that, did you?'

I shrugged. 'Of course.'

He looked at me thoughtfully for a few seconds before answering. 'He wanted to tell me some news - he didn't know if it was something I would share with you.'

'Will you?'

'I have to, because I'm going to be a little...
overbearingly protective over the next few
days - or weeks - and I wouldn't want you to
think I'm naturally a tyrant.'

'What's wrong?'

'Nothing's wrong, exactly. Alyson just sees
some visitors coming soon. They know we're
here, and they're curious. These are not like
us, Naddalin. They are of the 'Fallen,' those
who embrace the old ways, the true beast.
Their eyes, Naddalin, are a hex upon any who
cross them, a mark that ensures compliance or
a swift, brutal end. If you are 'hunted by the
eyes of them,' there is no escape, no mercy,
unless you comply with their dark whims. The

black bird is their herald, a shadow that precedes their hunger, a silent promise of the doom that follows their gaze. They probably won't come into town at all, but I'm certainly not going to let you out of my sight till they're gone.'

I shivered.

'Finally, a rational response!' he murmured. 'I was beginning to think you had no sense of self-preservation at all.'

I let that one pass, looking away, my eyes wandering again around the spacious room.

He followed my gaze. 'Not what you expected, is it?' he asked, his voice smug.

'No,' I admitted.

'No coffins, no piled skulls in the corners; I don't even think we have cobwebs... what a disappointment this must be for you,' he continued slyly.

I ignored his teasing. 'It's so light... so open.'

He was more serious when he answered. 'It's the one place we never have to hide.'

The song he was still playing, my song, drifted to an end, the final chords shifting to a more melancholy key. The last note hovered poignantly in the silence.

'Thank you,' I murmured. I realized there were tears in my eyes. I dabbed at them, embarrassed.

He touched the corner of my eye, trapping one I missed. He lifted his finger, examining the drop of moisture broodingly. Then, so quickly I couldn't be positive that he really did, he put his finger to his mouth to taste it.

I looked at him questioningly, and he gazed back for a long moment before he finally smiled.

'Do you want to see the rest of the house?'

'No coffins?' I verified, the sarcasm in my voice not entirely masking the slight but genuine anxiety I felt.

He laughed, taking my hand, leading me away from the piano.

'No coffins,' he promised.

We walked up the massive staircase, my hand trailing along the satin-smooth rail. The long hall at the top of the stairs was paneled with a honey-colored wood, the same as the floorboards.

'Seraphina and Kael's room... Alistair's office... Alyson's room...' He gestured as he led me past the doors.

He would have continued, but I stopped dead at the end of the hall, staring incredulously at the ornament hanging on the wall above my head. Nevaeh chuckled at my bewildered expression.

'You can laugh,' he said. 'It is sort of ironic.'

I didn't laugh. My hand raised automatically, one finger extended as if to touch the large wooden cross, its dark patina contrasting with the lighter tone of the wall. I didn't touch it, though I was curious if the aged wood would feel as silky as it looked.

'It must be very old,' I guessed.

He shrugged. 'Early sixteen-thirties, more or less.'

I looked away from the cross to stare at him.

'Why do you keep this here?' I wondered.

'Nostalgia. It belonged to Alistair's father.'

'He collected antiques?' I suggested doubtfully.

'No. He carved this himself. It hung on the wall above the pulpit in the vicarage where he preached.'

I wasn't sure if my face betrayed my shock, but I returned to gazing at the simple, ancient cross, just in case. I quickly did the mental math; the cross was over three hundred and seventy years old. The silence stretched on as I struggled to wrap my mind around the concept of so many years.

'Are you all right?' He sounded worried.

'How old is Alistair?' I asked quietly, ignoring his question, still staring up.

'He just celebrated his three hundred and sixty-second birthday,' Nevaeh said. I looked back at him, a million questions in my eyes.

He watched me carefully as he spoke.

'Alistair was born in London, in the sixteen-forties, he believes. Time wasn't marked as accurately then, for the common people anyway. It was just before Cromwell's rule, though.'

I kept my face composed, aware of his scrutiny as I listened. It was easier if I didn't try to believe.

'He was the only son of an Anglican pastor. His mother died giving birth to him. His father was an intolerant man. As the Protestants came into power, he was enthusiastic in his persecution of Roman Catholics and other religions. He also believed very strongly in the reality of evil. He led hunts for witches,

werewolves... and vampires.' I grew very still at the word. I'm sure he noticed, but he went on without pausing.

'They burned a lot of innocent people - of course the real creatures that he sought were not so easy to catch.

'When the pastor grew old, he placed his obedient son in charge of the raids. At first Alistair was a disappointment; he was not quick to accuse, to see demons where they did not exist. But he was persistent, and more clever than his father. He actually discovered a coven of true vampires that lived hidden in the sewers of the city, only coming out by night to hunt. In those days, when monsters were not just myths and legends, that was the way many lived.

'The people gathered their pitchforks and torches, of course' - his brief laugh was darker now - 'and waited where Alistair had seen the monsters exit into the street. Eventually one emerged.'

His voice was very quiet; I strained to catch the words.

'He must have been ancient, and weak with hunger. Alistair heard him call out in Latin to the others when he caught the scent of the mob. He ran through the streets, and Alistair - he was twenty-three and very fast - was in the lead of the pursuit. The creature could have easily outrun them, but Alistair thinks he was too hungry, so he turned and attacked. He fell on Alistair first, but the others were close behind, and he turned to

defend himself. He killed two men, and made off with a third, leaving Alistair bleeding in the street.'

He paused. I could sense he was editing something, keeping something from me.

'Alistair knew what his father would do. The bodies would be burned - anything infected by the monster must be destroyed. Alistair acted instinctively to save his own life. He crawled away from the alley while the mob followed the fiend and his victim. He hid in a cellar, buried himself in rotting potatoes for three days. It's a miracle he was able to keep silent, to stay undiscovered.

'It was over then, and he realized what he had become.'

I'm not sure what my face was revealing,
but he suddenly broke off.

'How are you feeling?' he asked.

'I'm fine,' I assured him. And, though I bit
my lip in hesitation, he must have seen the
curiosity burning in my eyes.

He smiled. 'I expect you have a few more
questions for me.'

'A few.'

His smile widened over his brilliant teeth.
He started back down the hall, pulling me
along by the hand. 'Come on, then,' he
encouraged. 'I'll show you.'

The Unveiling...

The morning, a muted symphony of grey light and soft drizzle, found our mortal protagonist stirring. The lingering tendrils of a dream, a struggle for recollection, hinted at the profound shifts occurring within her. The sudden rush of the previous day's events, a tide of impossible realities, swept over her consciousness.

'Oh!' Her abrupt awakening, a testament to her human fragility, was met by his familiar, unruffled voice from the rocking chair. 'Your hair looks like a haystack... but I like it.'

Nevaeh. He had remained. Her unthinking leap into his lap, a spontaneous act of joy, momentarily startled even him, yet his hands on her back, his pleased expression, confirmed the deepening of their precarious bond. She,

the human, was daring to be utterly, recklessly herself, and he, the immortal, found himself captivated by it.

Her sudden memory of Gabriel, her father, prompted another frantic movement. Nevaeh's casual dismissal of Gabriel's earlier departure, coupled with the telling detail of the reattached battery cables, revealed a subtle, almost playful, manipulation of her mortal world. He was already weaving himself into the fabric of her life, a silent, powerful presence. Her momentary confusion, the concern for 'morning breath,' was a poignant reminder of the mundane anxieties that still tethered her to humanity, even as she gravitated towards the extraordinary. The fleeting thought of Lily Anderson, down the

street, confined yet strong, underscored the stark contrast between Naddalin's newfound freedom and the quiet struggles of her world.

The introduction to the Amsel clan loomed. Her fear was not of their monstrous nature, but of their judgment, a very human concern for acceptance. Nevaeh's calm assurance that 'they already know everything,' and his wry mention of their family bets, painted a picture of a unit far more complex and ancient than mere mortals could comprehend. The casual mention of Alyson's precognition and Lysander's empathic influence highlighted the intricate web of their shared gifts, making secrets an impossibility within their ranks.

The domestic interlude, a breakfast of cereal and milk, offered a brief, almost

comical, glimpse into their disparate existences. Her 'hunting' for food, his amused observation, served as a stark contrast to the true nature of his kind. Yet, his willingness to engage in such mundane rituals spoke volumes of his deepening attachment, a desire to bridge the chasm between their worlds.

The conversation shifted to the impending introduction to Gabriel, her father. Nevaeh's insistence on being introduced as her 'boyfriend,' a term so utterly inadequate for their reality, was a deliberate step into her human world, a concession to its conventions. His playful admission of being a 'loose interpretation of the word 'boy'' underscored the vastness of his true age and power, yet his sincerity in wanting to be present, to protect

her, was undeniable. His unfathomable expression when she spoke of 'forever' hinted at the ancient sorrows and profound implications of such a promise for one of his kind.

The delicate dance of temptation and control continued. Her 'indecent' allure, his struggle to maintain composure, climaxed in a kiss that stole her breath and, quite literally, her consciousness. His exasperated groan, 'Yesterday I kiss you, and you attack me! Today you pass out on me!' was a rare moment of human-like frustration from a being of immense power. It revealed the raw, untamed nature of their connection, a force that defied his centuries of self-control.

The journey to the Amsel home, a monstrous Jeep driven by Nevaeh, was another test of her human limits. His playful 'tamper with your memory' threat, followed by the disarming intimacy of his touch and whispered reassurances, illustrated his mastery over her senses, a subtle yet potent manipulation. The revelation of the 'off-roading harness' and his casual mention of 'running the whole way' further emphasized the chasm between their physical realities.

The Amsel residence itself was a study in contrasts: a timeless, graceful structure nestled within primordial cedars, a place of light and openness that belied the dark nature of its inhabitants. The initial meeting with Alistair and Esme was a carefully orchestrated

affair, their measured movements and welcoming smiles designed to alleviate her apprehension. Alyson's enthusiastic greeting, a spontaneous kiss that shocked even her own family, was a testament to her unique, unbridled nature, and her immediate, visceral approval of Naddalin. Lysander's calming influence, a subtle wave of ease, further smoothed the awkward edges of the introduction.

The absence of Seraphina and Kael, and Nevaeh's evasive explanation, hinted at deeper family dynamics, a hidden resistance to Naddalin's presence. The music, Nevaeh's own composition, a complex melody infused with the lullaby he played for her, served as a

poignant symbol of their evolving bond, a creation born of her inspiration.

Alistair's hushed warning about impending 'visitors' introduced a new layer of peril.

'These are not like us, Naddalin. They are of the 'Fallen,' those who embrace the old ways, the true beast. Their eyes, Naddalin, are a hex upon any who cross them, a mark that ensures compliance or a swift, brutal end. If you are 'hunted by the eyes of them,' there is no escape, no mercy, unless you comply with their dark whims. The black bird is their herald, a shadow that precedes their hunger, a silent promise of the doom that follows their gaze.' The chilling description of these nomadic, dangerous beings solidified the ever-present threat that loomed over their fragile

existence. His possessive declaration of protection, 'I'm certainly not going to let you out of my sight till they're gone,' underscored the gravity of the situation.

The tour of the house, a revelation of its bright, open spaces, served as a contrast to the expected gothic gloom. The ancient wooden cross, a relic of Alistair's past, offered a profound glimpse into his origins: the son of an intolerant pastor, a hunter of 'witches, werewolves... and vampires.' The story of Alistair's own transformation, a desperate act of self-preservation after a brutal encounter with an ancient, hungry vampire, painted a vivid picture of his desperate fight for survival and his subsequent, conscious choice to retain his humanity. This was the foundation of the

Amsel's unique path, a deliberate defiance of their inherent nature.

The chapter concluded with Nevaeh's promise to show her more, a subtle invitation into the deeper, darker truths of his world. The questions lingered, unspoken but potent, promising further revelations as Naddalin ventured deeper into the extraordinary, dangerous life of the Amsel clan.

Chapter Fourteen: The Encounter and the Game

The soft drizzle of morning mirrored the lingering quiet of Naddalin's extraordinary retreat. Now, the mundane beckoned, her human life-and the looming presence of her father, Gabriel-pulling her back from the

profound. This oscillation between worlds, a constant negotiation of reality and the impossible, was becoming her delicate new balance.

As Nevaeh's truck turned onto her street, a weathered Ford in Gabriel's driveway, coupled with Nevaeh's guttural utterance, signaled an unwelcome intrusion. Ben, a figure from the local tribe, stood with his father, Benjamin Black, their presence a stark reminder of ancient tensions simmering beneath the town's quiet surface. Nevaeh's fury, a rare glimpse of his untamed nature, was palpable. 'This is crossing the line,' he asserted, recognizing the deliberate provocation. The poignant relief that Gabriel

absent underscored the fragile secrecy
Naddalin fought to maintain.

'Get them inside,' Nevaeh commanded before departing, a clear highlight of the calculated risks he took. His almost paternal warning, 'The child has no idea,' underscored Ben's innocence in the face of their hidden world. The subsequent exchange with Benjamin Black was a subtle dance of veiled threats and guarded truths. Naddalin, surprisingly, held her own, her sharp retort regarding the Amsels' reputation and their adherence to the territorial agreement a testament to Nevaeh's influence and her own burgeoning acumen. Benjamin's reluctant concession, 'I guess that's your business, too,' marked a small victory in this silent war of

wills. A fleeting thought of Lily Anderson, down the street, confined to her chair yet radiating quiet strength, served as a grounding contrast to Naddalin's increasingly fantastical reality.

The subsequent phone call with Lily, a mundane echo of her former life, felt strangely distant, almost irrelevant against the backdrop of her new reality. Dances and high school crushes seemed mere shadows compared to Nevaeh's incandescent presence. Gabriel's return home necessitated the carefully orchestrated revelation of her 'boyfriend.' His paternal alarm, a predictable human reaction, was met with Naddalin's surprising composure-a testament to the transformative power of her experiences.

It was just beginning to drizzle when Nevaeh turned onto my street. Up until that moment, I'd had no doubt that he'd be staying with me while I spent a few interim hours in the real world. And then I saw the black car, that weathered Ford, parked in Gabriel's driveway-and heard Nevaeh mutter something unintelligible in a low, harsh voice.

The name 'Naddalin' had been a shield, a quiet rebellion against a past her grandmother, Hope, had desperately sought to erase. A past tied to the very lineage Nevaeh now represented in this rain-slicked driveway, a past where her own birth name, Nevaeh, had once been a whisper of a heritage her grandmother had fiercely guarded from her. The irony was a bitter taste, yet here he was,

the other Nevaeh, a figure of effortless grace even in the pouring rain, further underscoring the chasm between her human world and his.

The introduction to Gabriel was a meticulously managed performance, revealing Nevaeh's unexpected charm and deference to mortal customs. His playful deference, a calculated act of normalcy, served to disarm the wary father. Kael's formidable 'monster Jeep' was a visceral symbol of the Amsels' power and their unique approach to existence. The 'off-roading harness' and Nevaeh's casual mention of 'running the whole way' further highlighted the vast physical disparity between them, a reality that continued to challenge Naddalin's human comprehension. His subtle manipulation of her fear, a series of

cold kisses designed to quell her anxieties, demonstrated his profound understanding of her vulnerabilities and his willingness to exploit them for her comfort.

The journey to the baseball field, a breathtaking sprint through the forest with Naddalin on Nevaeh's back, was a testament to his controlled power. The game itself was a spectacle of impossible speed and strength, a display of abilities far beyond mortal ken. Alistair's measured throws, Alyson's deceptive pitches, Lysander's empathic calm, Kael's thunderous hits, and Seraphina's graceful movements all converged in a display of superhuman athleticism. Elara, the serene referee, embodied the Amsels' unique morality-a family striving for a semblance of

human normalcy amidst their extraordinary existence. Her poignant revelation of her lost child and her profound joy at Nevaeh finding Naddalin offered a glimpse into the deep emotional currents that flowed within this immortal family.

The sudden shift in Alyson's vision, a premonition of approaching 'visitors,' introduced a new, chilling layer of peril. Nevaeh's immediate, possessive protectiveness underscored the gravity of the threat. 'These are not like us, Naddalin. They are of the 'Fallen,' those who embrace the old ways, the true beast. Their eyes, Naddalin, are a hex upon any who cross them, a mark that ensures compliance or a swift, brutal end. If you are 'hunted by the eyes of them,' there is

no escape, no mercy, unless you comply with their dark whims. The black bird is their herald, a shadow that precedes their hunger, a silent promise of the doom that follows their gaze.' This chilling exposition solidified the inherent danger of their world, a world where ancient, predatory forces still roamed, and where the Amsels' chosen path was a fragile anomaly.

The chapter concluded with the ominous arrival of these unknown entities, a promise of conflict and further revelations in Naddalin's increasingly perilous journey into the heart of the immortal world.

Chapter Fifteen: Unveiling and the Chase

The air, already heavy with the scent of rain-soaked earth, now shimmered with an almost ethereal tension. Alyson's sudden gasp, her hand flying to her temple, had been the first delicate tremor. Then, the collective shift in the Amsels – a subtle tensing of muscles, a sharpening of gazes – confirmed the chilling truth of her premonition. Naddalin felt it too, a whisper against her skin, a primal instinct stirring even before her eyes found them.

They emerged from the dense tree line, not with the abruptness of a threat, but with a languid, almost graceful stillness that spoke of ancient, alluring shadows. Two figures, their movements fluid as moonlight on water, stepped onto the edge of the baseball field. Their eyes, even from a distance, seemed to

hold the very essence of twilight, a deep, unsettling void that Nevaeh had warned her about. No black bird heralded their arrival here; their presence was its own silent, mesmerizing announcement.

Nevaeh moved with a speed that blurred, pulling Naddalin gently behind him, his body a tender, rigid shield. His hand, cool and firm, pressed against the small of her back, guiding her towards the dugout, away from the exposed field. 'Stay low, Naddalin. Do not meet their gaze,' his voice was a velvet murmur, laced with an urgency that sent a thrilling shiver down her spine. The Amsels, a formidable line, had already positioned themselves, their casual game stances replaced by an almost terrifying, yet beautiful,

readiness. Alistair stood tall, his usual calm now a fierce, protective intensity. Kael, a coiled spring of power, clenched his fists, while Lysander's empathic calm seemed to ripple, a faint unease crossing his features. Even Elara, the serene referee, held herself with a new, rigid posture, her eyes fixed on the approaching enigma.

The two newcomers were lean, their clothes dark and unremarkable, yet they carried an aura of profound, dark allure. One, taller and broader, had hair like spun shadow and eyes that seemed to absorb all light, drawing it into their depths. The other, slighter, moved with a serpentine grace, a faint, unsettling smile playing on his lips, a promise of hidden dangers. They stopped a

dozen yards from the Amsels, the silence between the two groups stretching taut, vibrating with unspoken, ancient challenges.

'Nevaeh,' the taller one's voice was a low rasp, like silk over stone. 'We heard you found something... exquisite.' His gaze flickered, momentarily brushing past Nevaeh's shoulder, and Naddalin instinctively flinched, feeling a cold, invasive whisper at the edge of her awareness, a faint echo of the hex Nevaeh had described. She pressed herself tighter against Nevaeh's back, her heart a frantic drum against his steady presence.

'She is not for you, Valerius,' Nevaeh's voice was devoid of its usual charm, replaced by an icy resolve Naddalin had never heard,

yet it resonated with an undeniable devotion.

'She is under our protection.'

The slighter figure chuckled, a dry, rustling sound, like leaves in a forgotten wind. 'Protection? Or possession, Nevaeh? The scent of a human, so fresh, so... untainted. A rare delicacy, even for your kind.' His eyes, like chips of obsidian, locked onto the space where Naddalin was hidden, a gaze that felt both distant and intimately chilling.

Alistair took a step forward, his voice a low, resonant warning. 'You trespass on our territory. There are agreements.'

'Agreements are for those who fear,' Valerius countered, his voice gaining a chilling resonance, a seductive hum. 'We fear nothing.'

We simply... take what is ours by right.' His gaze intensified, and Naddalin felt a sudden, overwhelming urge to step out, to expose herself, to comply. It was a terrifying, alien sensation, a mental tug-of-war that left her breathless, yet strangely compelled.

Nevaeh's arm tightened around her, a silent, powerful anchor. 'Not this time,' he hissed, and then, with a speed that defied comprehension, he scooped Naddalin into his arms, a motion so swift it felt like she was swept into a dream. 'Run!' he roared to his family, and the world dissolved into a blur of green and brown as he launched himself into the forest, leaving the Amsels to face the Fallen.

Naddalin clung to him, the wind a soft caress against her face, the sounds of the baseball field fading behind them, replaced by the rhythmic pounding of Nevaeh's impossible stride and the growing, chilling certainty that the hunt had just begun. She didn't know why she was being hunted, or who these 'Fallen' truly were beyond Nevaeh's grim warning, but she knew one thing: her world had just irrevocably shattered, yet in Nevaeh's arms, even the shattering held a strange, desperate beauty.

The forest became a living tunnel, a kaleidoscope of blurred greens and browns as Nevaeh surged through it. The rain, now a steady patter, felt like a thousand cool kisses against Naddalin's skin as they moved. She

buried her face against his neck, inhaling the intoxicating scent of him – rain, pine, and something else, something uniquely Nevaeh, a cold, sweet fragrance that calmed the frantic beat of her heart. His muscles flexed beneath her, a testament to his controlled power, and she felt utterly safe, cradled in the whirlwind of his escape. This wasn't fear, not truly. It was a dizzying, exhilarating surrender to the impossible, to him.

He didn't slow, not for what felt like an eternity, until the roar of a distant waterfall began to fill the air, muffling any sounds of pursuit. He finally eased to a halt within a hidden alcove, a small, moss-covered cave tucked behind a curtain of weeping ferns. The air within was cool and damp, carrying the

fresh scent of earth and mist. He set her down gently, his eyes, dark as midnight, searching hers.

'Are you hurt?' His voice, though still laced with urgency, was softer now, a tender inquiry that made her breath catch.

Naddalin shook her head, still reeling from the impossible journey. 'No. Just... breathless.' She reached out, her fingers tracing the sharp line of his jaw, marveling at the cool, smooth skin. 'Who were they, Nevaeh? Really?'

He sighed, a sound like wind through dry leaves. 'They are what happens when our kind forgets the light, Naddalin. When the hunger consumes everything but the self. Valerius... he has always coveted what is rare, what is

pure. And you, my Naddalin, are rarer than any jewel, purer than any spring.' His thumb stroked her cheek, a gesture of profound tenderness that belied the danger they were in. 'They are drawn to your essence, to the vitality of your human life. It is... a temptation they cannot resist.'

A chill, colder than the forest air, settled over her. 'So, they want to... consume me?' The word was a stark contrast to the dreamy romance of the chase, but she needed to know.

Nevaeh's eyes hardened, a flicker of raw protectiveness in their depths. 'They want to corrupt, to drain, to break. But they will not touch you. Not while I breathe.' He pulled her closer, wrapping his arms around her, and Naddalin felt the solid, unyielding strength of

him. In his embrace, even the terrifying truth of the Fallen felt distant, a nightmare held at bay by the sheer force of his will.

But then, a faint rustle from the ferns outside the alcove, too deliberate to be the wind, too heavy to be a small animal. Nevaeh's head snapped up, his senses instantly alert. His grip on Naddalin tightened, his body tensing once more into a predatory readiness. The dreamlike beauty of their temporary sanctuary evaporated, replaced by the sharp, cold reality of their continued peril. The hunt, it seemed, was far from over.

Chapter sixteen: Unforseen Shadow

The persistent drizzle, a familiar veil over the Pacific Northwest, was just beginning its

descent when Nevaeh's truck turned onto Naddalin's street. Until that precise moment, the mortal girl had harbored no doubt of his continued presence, a silent anchor as she prepared to navigate the interim hours within her 'real' world. Yet, the sight that greeted them shattered this fragile expectation: a weathered Ford, black as a raven's wing, sat parked in Gabriel's driveway. Nevaeh's low, guttural utterance, a sound of profound displeasure, confirmed the unwelcome intrusion.

Leaning away from the rain beneath the shallow porch, Thaddeus Black stood, a youthful shadow behind his father, Benjamin Black, whose face remained an impassive mask of stone as Nevaeh brought the truck to

the curb. Thaddeus, in contrast, stared at the ground, his expression a tableau of mortification.

Nevaeh's voice, a low, furious growl, cut through the damp air. 'This is crossing the line.'

'He came to warn Gabriel?' Naddalin surmised, a wave of horror eclipsing her nascent anger.

Nevaeh merely nodded, his eyes, narrowed slits of gold, meeting Benjamin Black's unblinking gaze through the sheeting rain. A wave of profound relief washed over Naddalin; Gabriel was not yet home.

'Let me deal with this,' she suggested, Nevaeh's dark glare tightening the coil of anxiety in her stomach.

To her surprise, he acquiesced. 'That's probably best. Be careful, though. The child has no idea.'

Naddalin bristled, a flicker of human pride asserting itself. 'Thaddeus is not that much younger than I am,' she reminded him.

His anger abruptly softened, replaced by a knowing grin. 'Oh, I know,' he assured her.

She sighed, her hand finding the door handle.

'Get them inside,' he instructed, his voice firm, 'so I can leave. I'll be back around dusk.'

'Do you want my truck?' she offered, already mentally grappling with the impossible explanation for its absence to Gabriel.

He rolled his eyes, a flicker of amusement in their depths. 'I could walk home faster than this truck moves.'

'You don't have to leave,' Naddalin said wistfully, the words a raw confession of longing.

He smiled at her glum expression. 'Actually, I do. After you get rid of them' - he cast a dark, dismissive glance towards the Blacks - 'you still have to prepare Gabriel to meet your new boyfriend.' His grin widened, revealing the dazzling perfection of his teeth.

Naddalin groaned. 'Thanks a lot.'

He offered the crooked smile she had come to adore. 'I'll be back soon,' he promised. His eyes flickered towards the porch, then he leaned in, a swift, cold kiss landing just under the edge of her jaw. Her heart lurched frantically, and she, too, glanced towards the porch. Benjamin Black's face was no longer impassive; his hands clutched the armrests of his chair, a silent testament to the shock that had finally pierced his stoic facade.

'Soon,' Naddalin stressed, opening the door and stepping out into the rain.

She could feel his unwavering gaze on her back as she half-ran through the light sprinkle towards the porch.

'Hey, Benjamin. Hi, Thaddeus.' Naddalin greeted them with a forced cheerfulness.

'Gabriel's gone for the day - I hope you haven't been waiting long.'

'Not long,' Benjamin Black replied, his tone subdued, his black eyes piercing. 'I just wanted to bring this up.' He indicated a brown paper sack resting in his lap.

'Thanks,' Naddalin said, though she had no idea what it contained. 'Why don't you come in for a minute and dry off?'

She feigned oblivion to his intense scrutiny as she unlocked the door, waving them in ahead of her.

'Here, let me take that,' she offered, turning to shut the door. She allowed herself

one last, lingering glance at Nevaeh. He waited, perfectly still, his eyes solemn, a silent sentinel in the rain.

'You'll want to put it in the fridge,' Benjamin Black noted as he handed her the package. 'It's some of Harry Riverstone's homemade fish fry - Gabriel's favorite. The fridge keeps it drier.' He shrugged.

'Thanks,' Naddalin repeated, this time with genuine feeling. 'I was running out of new ways to fix fish, and he's bound to bring home more tonight.'

'Fishing again?' Benjamin Black asked, a subtle gleam in his eye. 'Down at the usual spot? Maybe I'll run by and see him.'

'No,' Naddalin quickly lied, her face hardening. 'He was headed someplace new... but I have no idea where.'

He took in her changed expression, and it made him thoughtful.

'Jake,' he said, still appraising her. 'Why don't you go get that new picture of Rebecca out of the car? I'll leave that for Gabriel, too.'

'Where is it?' Thaddeus asked, his voice morose. Naddalin glanced at him, but he was staring at the floor, his eyebrows pulling together.

'I think I saw it in the trunk,' Benjamin Black said. 'You may have to dig for it.'

Thaddeus slouched back out into the rain.

Benjamin Black and Naddalin faced each other in silence. After a few seconds, the quiet began to feel awkward, so she turned and headed to the kitchen. She could hear his wet wheels squeak against the linoleum as he followed.

She shoved the bag onto the crowded top shelf of the fridge, then spun around to confront him. His deeply lined face remained unreadable.

'Gabriel won't be back for a long time.'
Her voice was almost rude in its bluntness.

He nodded in agreement, but said nothing.

'Thanks again for the fish fry,' Naddalin hinted, attempting to break the silence.

He continued nodding. She sighed and folded her arms across her chest.

He seemed to sense that she had given up on small talk. 'Naddalin,' he said, then hesitated.

She waited.

'Naddalin,' he repeated, 'Gabriel is one of my best friends.'

'Yes.'

He spoke each word carefully in his rumbling voice. 'I noticed you've been spending time with one of the Amsels.'

'Yes,' Naddalin repeated curtly.

His eyes narrowed. 'Maybe it's none of my business, but I don't think that is such a good idea.'

'You're right,' Naddalin agreed. 'It is none of your business.'

He raised his graying eyebrows at her tone. 'You probably don't know this, but the Amsel family has an unpleasant reputation on the reservation.'

'Actually, I did know that,' Naddalin informed him in a hard voice. This surprised him. 'But that reputation couldn't be deserved, could it? Because the Amsels never set foot on the reservation, do they?' She could see that her less than subtle reminder of the

agreement that both bound and protected his tribe pulled him up short.

'That's true,' he acceded, his eyes guarded. 'You seem... well informed about the Amsels. More informed than I expected.'

Naddalin stared him down. 'Maybe even better informed than you are.'

He pursed his thick lips as he considered that. 'Maybe.' he allowed, but his eyes were shrewd. 'Is Gabriel as well informed?'

He had found the weak chink in her armor.

'Gabriel likes the Amsels a lot,' Naddalin hedged. He clearly understood her evasion. His expression was unhappy, but unsurprised.

'It's not my business,' he said. 'But it may be Gabriel's.'

'Though it would be my business, again, whether or not I think that it's Gabriel's business, right?'

Naddalin wondered if he even understood her confused question as she struggled not to say anything compromising. But he seemed to. He thought about it while the rain picked up against the roof, the only sound breaking the silence.

'Yes,' he finally surrendered. 'I guess that's your business, too.'

Naddalin sighed with relief. 'Thanks, Benjamin.'

'Just think about what you're doing, Naddalin,' he urged.

'Okay,' Naddalin agreed quickly.

He frowned. 'What I meant to say was, don't do what you're doing.'

Naddalin looked into his eyes, filled with nothing but concern for her, and there was nothing she could say.

Just then the front door banged loudly, and she jumped at the sound.

'There's no picture anywhere in that car.' Thaddeus's complaining voice reached them before he did. The shoulders of his shirt were stained with the rain, his hair dripping, when he rounded the corner.

'Hmm,' Benjamin Black grunted, suddenly detached, spinning his chair around to face his son. 'I guess I left it at home.'

Thaddeus rolled his eyes dramatically.
'Great.'

'Well, Naddalin, tell Gabriel' - Benjamin Black paused before continuing - 'that we stopped by, I mean.'

'I will,' Naddalin muttered.

Thaddeus was surprised. 'Are we leaving already?'

'Gabriel's gonna be out late,' Benjamin Black explained as he rolled himself past Thaddeus.

'Oh.' Thaddeus looked disappointed. 'Well, I guess I'll see you later, then, Naddalin.'

'Sure,' Naddalin agreed.

'Take care,' Benjamin Black warned her. Naddalin didn't answer.

Thaddeus helped his father out the door. Naddalin waved briefly, glancing swiftly toward her now-empty truck, and then shut the door before they were gone.

She stood in the hallway for a minute, listening to the sound of their car as it backed out and drove away. She stayed where she was, waiting for the irritation and anxiety to subside. When the tension eventually faded a bit, she headed upstairs to change out of her dressy clothes.

She tried on a couple of different tops, not sure what to expect tonight. As she concentrated on what was coming, what had just passed became insignificant. Now that she was removed from Elody's and Nevaeh's influence, she began to make up for not being terrified before. She gave up quickly on choosing an outfit - throwing on an old flannel shirt and jeans - knowing she would be in her raincoat all night anyway.

The phone rang and she sprinted downstairs to get it. There was only one voice she wanted to hear; anything else would be a disappointment. But she knew that if he wanted to talk to her, he'd probably just materialize in her room.

'Hello?' Naddalin asked, breathless.

'Naddalin? It's me,' Jessica said.

'Oh, hey, Jess.' Naddalin scrambled for a moment to come back down to reality. It felt like months rather than days since she'd spoken to Jess. 'How was the dance?'

'It was so much fun!' Jessica gushed. Needing no more invitation than that, she launched into a minute-by-minute account of the previous night. Naddalin mmm'd and ahh'd at the right places, but it wasn't easy to concentrate. Jessica, Mike, the dance, the school - they all seemed strangely irrelevant at the moment. Her eyes kept flashing to the window, trying to judge the degree of light behind the heavy clouds.

'Did you hear what I said, Naddalin?' Jess asked, irritated.

'I'm sorry, what?'

'I said, Mike kissed me! Can you believe it?'

'That's wonderful, Jess,' Naddalin said.

'So what did you do yesterday?' Jessica challenged, still sounding bothered by her lack of attention. Or maybe she was upset because Naddalin hadn't asked for details.

'Nothing, really. I just hung around outside to enjoy the sun.'

Naddalin heard Gabriel's car in the garage.

'Did you ever hear anything more from Nevaeh Amsel?'

The front door slammed and Naddalin could hear Gabriel banging around under the stairs, putting his tackle away.

'Um.' Naddalin hesitated, not sure what her story was anymore.

'Hi there, kiddo!' Gabriel called as he walked into the kitchen. Naddalin waved at him.

Jess heard his voice. 'Oh, your dad's there. Never mind - we'll talk tomorrow. See you in Trig.'

'See ya, Jess.' Naddalin hung up the phone.

'Hey, Dad,' Naddalin said. He was scrubbing his hands in the sink. 'Where's the fish?'

'I put it out in the freezer.'

'I'll go grab a few pieces before they freeze - Benjamin dropped off some of Harry Riverstone's homemade fish fry this afternoon.' Naddalin worked to sound enthusiastic.

'He did?' Gabriel's eyes lit up. 'That's my favorite.'

Gabriel cleaned up while Naddalin got dinner ready. It didn't take long till they were sitting at the table, eating in silence. Gabriel was enjoying his food. Naddalin was wondering desperately how to fulfill her

assignment, struggling to think of a way to broach the subject.

'What did you do with yourself today?' he asked, snapping her out of her reverie.

'Well, this afternoon I just hung out around the house...' Only the very recent part of this afternoon, actually. Naddalin tried to keep her voice upbeat, but her stomach was hollow. 'And this morning I was over at the Amsels'.'

Gabriel dropped his fork.

'Dr. Alistair's place?' he asked in astonishment.

Naddalin pretended not to notice his reaction. 'Yeah.'

'What were you doing there?' He hadn't picked his fork back up.

'Well, I sort of have a date with Nevaeh Amsel tonight, and he wanted to introduce me to his parents... Dad?'

It appeared that Gabriel was having an aneurysm.

'Dad, are you all right?'

'You are going out with Nevaeh Amsel?' he thundered.

Uh-oh. 'I thought you liked the Amsels.'

'He's too old for you,' he ranted.

'We're both juniors,' Naddalin corrected, though he was more right than he dreamed.

'Wait...' He paused. 'Which one is Nevaeh?'

'Nevaeh is the youngest, the one with the reddish brown hair.' The beautiful one, the godlike one...

'Oh, well, that's' - he struggled - 'better, I guess. I don't like the look of that big one. I'm sure he's a nice boy and all, but he looks too... mature for you. Is this Nevaeh your boyfriend?'

'It's Nevaeh, Dad.'

'Is he?'

'Sort of, I guess.'

'You said last night that you weren't interested in any of the boys in town.' But he

picked up his fork again, so Naddalin could see the worst was over.

'Well, Nevaeh doesn't live in town, Dad.'

He gave her a disparaging look as he chewed.

'And, anyways,' Naddalin continued, 'it's kind of at an early stage, you know. Don't embarrass me with all the boyfriend talk, okay?'

'When is he coming over?'

'He'll be here in a few minutes.'

'Where is he taking you?'

Naddalin groaned loudly. 'I hope you're getting the Spanish Inquisition out of your

system now. We're going to play baseball with his family.'

His face puckered, and then he finally chuckled. 'You're playing baseball?'

'Well, I'll probably watch most of the time.'

'You must really like this guy,' he observed suspiciously.

Naddalin sighed and rolled her eyes for his benefit.

She heard the roar of an engine pull up in front of the house. She jumped up and started cleaning her dishes.

'Leave the dishes, I can do them tonight. You baby me too much.'

The doorbell rang, and Gabriel stalked off to answer it. Naddalin was half a step behind him.

She hadn't realized how hard it was pouring outside. Nevaeh stood in the halo of the porch light, looking like a male model in an advertisement for raincoats.

'Come on in, Nevaeh.'

Naddalin breathed a sigh of relief when Gabriel got his name right.

'Thanks, Chief Stone,' Nevaeh said in a respectful voice.

'Go ahead and call me Gabriel. Here, I'll take your jacket.'

'Thanks, sir.'

'Have a seat there, Nevaeh.'

Naddalin grimaced.

Nevaeh sat down fluidly in the only chair, forcing Naddalin to sit next to Chief Stone on the sofa. Naddalin quickly shot him a dirty look. He winked behind Gabriel's back.

'So I hear you're getting my girl to watch baseball.' Only in Washington would the fact that it was raining buckets have no bearing at all on the playing of outdoor sports.

'Yes, sir, that's the plan.' He didn't look surprised that Naddalin had told her father the truth. He might have been listening, though.

'Well, more power to you, I guess.'

Gabriel laughed, and Nevaeh joined in.

'Okay.' Naddalin stood up. 'Enough humor at my expense. Let's go.' She walked back to the hall and pulled on her jacket. They followed.

'Not too late, Naddalin.'

'Don't worry, Gabriel, I'll have her home early,' Nevaeh promised.

'You take care of my girl, all right?'

Naddalin groaned, but they ignored her.

'She'll be safe with me, I promise, sir.'

Gabriel couldn't doubt Nevaeh's sincerity; it rang in every word.

Naddalin stalked out. They both laughed, and Nevaeh followed her.

She stopped dead on the porch. There, behind her truck, was a monster Jeep. Its tires were higher than her waist. There were metal guards over the headlights and tail-lights, and four large spotlights attached to the crash bar. The hardtop was shiny red.

Gabriel let out a low whistle.

'Wear your seat belts,' he choked out.

Nevaeh followed Naddalin around to her side and opened the door. Naddalin gauged the distance to the seat and prepared to jump for it. He sighed, and then lifted her in with one hand. She hoped Gabriel didn't notice.

As he went around to the driver's side, at a normal, human pace, Naddalin tried to put on

her seat belt. But there were too many buckles.

'What's all this?' Naddalin asked when he opened the door.

'It's an off-roading harness.'

'Uh-oh.'

Naddalin tried to find the right places for all the buckles to fit, but it wasn't going too quickly. He sighed again and reached over to help her. Naddalin was glad that the rain was too heavy to see Gabriel clearly on the porch. That meant he couldn't see how Nevaeh's hands lingered at her neck, brushed along her collarbones. Naddalin gave up trying to help him and focused on not hyperventilating.

Nevaeh turned the key and the engine roared to life. They pulled away from the house.

'This is a... um... big Jeep you have.'

'It's Kael's. I didn't think you'd want to run the whole way.'

'Where do you keep this thing?'

'We remodeled one of the outbuildings into a garage.'

'Aren't you going to put on your seat belt?'

He threw her a disbelieving look.

Then something sunk in.

'Run the whole way? As in, we're still going to run part of the way?' Naddalin's voice edged up a few octaves.

He grinned tightly. 'You're not going to run.'

'I'm going to be sick.'

'Keep your eyes closed, you'll be fine.'

Naddalin bit her lip, fighting the panic.

He leaned over to kiss the top of her head, and then groaned. Naddalin looked at him, puzzled.

'You smell so good in the rain,' he explained.

'In a good way, or in a bad way?' Naddalin asked cautiously.

He sighed. 'Both, always both.'

Naddalin didn't know how he found his way in the gloom and downpour, but he somehow found a side road that was less of a road and more of a mountain path. For a long while conversation was impossible, because Naddalin was bouncing up and down on the seat like a jackhammer. He seemed to enjoy the ride, though, smiling hugely the whole way.

And then they came to the end of the road; the trees formed green walls on three sides of the Jeep. The rain was a mere drizzle, slowing

every second, the sky brighter through the clouds.

'Sorry, Naddalin, we have to go on foot from here.'

'You know what? I'll just wait here.'

'What happened to all your courage? You were extraordinary this morning.'

'I haven't forgotten the last time yet.'
Could it have been only yesterday?

He was around to her side of the car in a blur. He started unbuckling her.

'I'll get those, you go on ahead,' Naddalin protested.

'Hmmm...' he mused as he quickly finished. 'It seems I'm going to have to tamper with your memory.'

Before Naddalin could react, he pulled her from the Jeep and set her feet on the ground. It was barely misting now; Alyson was going to be right.

'Tamper with my memory?' Naddalin asked nervously.

'Something like that.' He was watching her intently, carefully, but there was humor deep in his eyes. He placed his hands against the Jeep on either side of her head and leaned forward, forcing her to press back against the door. He leaned in even closer, his face inches from hers. Naddalin had no room to escape.

'Now,' he breathed, and just his smell disturbed her thought processes, 'what exactly are you worrying about?'

'Well, um, hitting a tree -' Naddalin gulped
'- and dying. And then getting sick.'

He fought back a smile. Then he bent his head down and touched his cold lips softly to the hollow at the base of her throat.

'Are you still worried now?' he murmured against her skin.

'Yes.' Naddalin struggled to concentrate.
'About hitting trees and getting sick.'

His nose drew a line up the skin of her throat to the point of her chin. His cold breath tickled her skin.

'And now?' His lips whispered against her jaw.

'Trees,' Naddalin gasped. 'Motion sickness.'

He lifted his face to kiss her eyelids.
'Naddalin, you don't really think I would hit a tree, do you?'

'No, but I might.' There was no confidence in Naddalin's voice. He smelled an easy victory.

He kissed slowly down her cheek, stopping just at the corner of her mouth.

'Would I let a tree hurt you?' His lips barely brushed against her trembling lower lip.

'No,' Naddalin breathed. She knew there was a second part to her brilliant defense, but she couldn't quite call it back.

'You see,' he said, his lips moving against hers. 'There's nothing to be afraid of, is there?'

'No,' Naddalin sighed, giving up.

Then he took her face in his hands almost roughly, and kissed her in earnest, his unyielding lips moving against hers.

There really was no excuse for Naddalin's behavior. Obviously she knew better by now. And yet she couldn't seem to stop from reacting exactly as she had the first time. Instead of keeping safely motionless, her arms reached up to twine tightly around his neck,

and she was suddenly welded to his stone figure. She sighed, and her lips parted.

He staggered back, breaking her grip effortlessly.

'Damn it, Naddalin!' he broke off, gasping.
'You'll be the death of me, I swear you will.'

Naddalin leaned over, bracing her hands against her knees for support.

'You're indestructible,' Naddalin mumbled, trying to catch her breath.

'I might have believed that before I met you. Now let's get out of here before I do something really stupid,' he growled.

He threw her across his back as he had before, and Naddalin could see the extra effort

it took for him to be as gentle as she was. She locked her legs around his waist and secured her arms in a choke hold around his neck.

'Don't forget to close your eyes,' he warned severely.

Naddalin quickly tucked her face into his shoulder blade, under her own arm, and squeezed her eyes shut.

And Naddalin could hardly tell they were moving. She could feel him gliding along beneath her, but he could have been strolling down the sidewalk, the movement was so smooth. She was tempted to peek, just to see if he was really flying through the forest like before, but she resisted. It wasn't worth that

awful dizziness. She contented herself with listening to his breath come and go evenly.

Naddalin wasn't quite sure they had stopped until he reached back and touched her hair.

'It's over, Naddalin.'

Naddalin dared to open her eyes, and, sure enough, they were at a standstill. She stiffly unlocked her stranglehold on his body and slipped to the ground, landing on her backside.

'Oh!' Naddalin huffed as she hit the wet ground.

He stared at her incredulously, evidently not sure whether he was still too mad to find

her funny. But her bewildered expression pushed him over the edge, and he broke into a roar of laughter.

Naddalin picked herself up, ignoring him as she brushed the mud and bracken off the back of her jacket. That only made him laugh harder. Annoyed, Naddalin began to stride off into the forest.

She felt his arm around her waist.

'Where are you going, Naddalin?'

'To watch a baseball game. You don't seem to be interested in playing anymore, but I'm sure the others will have fun without you.'

'You're going the wrong way.'

Naddalin turned around without looking at him, and stalked off in the opposite direction. He caught her again.

'Don't be mad, I couldn't help myself. You should have seen your face.' He chuckled before he could stop himself.

'Oh, you're the only one who's allowed to get mad?' Naddalin asked, raising her eyebrows.

'I wasn't mad at you.'

"Naddalin, you'll be the death of me?"
Naddalin quoted sourly.

'That was simply a statement of fact.'

Naddalin tried to turn away from him again, but he held her fast.

'You were mad,' Naddalin insisted.

'Yes.'

'But you just said -'

'That I wasn't mad at you. Can't you see that, Naddalin?' He was suddenly intense, all trace of teasing gone. 'Don't you understand?'

'See what?' Naddalin demanded, confused by his sudden mood swing as much as his words.

'I'm never angry with you - how could I be? Brave, trusting... warm as you are.'

'Then why?' Naddalin whispered, remembering the black moods that pulled him away from her, that she'd always interpreted as well-justified frustration - frustration at her

weakness, her slowness, her unruly human reactions...

He put his hands carefully on both sides of her face. 'I infuriate myself,' he said gently.

'The way I can't seem to keep from putting you in danger. My very existence puts you at risk. Sometimes I truly hate myself. I should be stronger, I should be able to -'

Naddalin placed her hand over his mouth. 'Don't.'

He took her hand, moving it from his lips, but holding it to his face.

'I love you,' he said. 'It's a poor excuse for what I'm doing, but it's still true.'

It was the first time he'd said he loved her - in so many words. He might not realize it, but Naddalin certainly did.

'Now, please try to behave yourself,' he continued, and he bent to softly brush his lips against hers.

Naddalin held properly still. Then she sighed.

'You promised Chief Stone that you would have me home early, remember? We'd better get going.'

'Yes, ma'am.'

He smiled wistfully and released all of her but one hand. He led her a few feet through the tall, wet ferns and draping moss, around a

massive hemlock tree, and they were there, on the edge of an enormous open field in the lap of the Olympic peaks. It was twice the size of any baseball stadium.

Naddalin could see the others all there; Elara, Kael, and Seraphina, sitting on a bare outcropping of rock, were the closest to them, maybe a hundred yards away. Much farther out Naddalin could see Elody and Alyson, at least a quarter of a mile apart, appearing to throw something back and forth, but she never saw any ball. It looked like Alistair was marking bases, but could they really be that far apart?

When they came into view, the three on the rocks rose.

Elara started toward them. Kael followed after a long look at Seraphina's back; Seraphina had risen gracefully and strode off toward the field without a glance in their direction. Naddalin's stomach quivered uneasily in response.

'Was that you we heard, Nevaeh?' Elara asked as she approached.

'It sounded like a bear choking,' Kael clarified.

Naddalin smiled hesitantly at Elara. 'That was him.'

'Naddalin was being unintentionally funny,' Nevaeh explained, quickly settling the score.

Alyson had left her position and was running, or dancing, toward them. She hurtled to a fluid stop at their feet. 'It's time,' she announced.

As soon as she spoke, a deep rumble of thunder shook the forest beyond them, and then crashed westward toward town.

'Eerie, isn't it?' Kael said with easy familiarity, winking at Naddalin.

'Let's go.' Alyson reached for Kael's hand and they darted toward the oversized field; she ran like a gazelle. He was nearly as graceful and just as fast - yet Kael could never be compared to a gazelle.

'Are you ready for some ball?' Nevaeh asked, his eyes eager, bright.

Naddalin tried to sound appropriately enthusiastic. 'Go team!'

He snickered and, after mussing her hair, bounded off after the other two. His run was more aggressive, a cheetah rather than a gazelle, and he quickly overtook them. The grace and power took Naddalin's breath away.

'Shall we go down?' Elara asked in her soft, melodic voice, and Naddalin realized she was staring openmouthed after him. She quickly reassembled her expression and nodded. Elara kept a few feet between them, and Naddalin wondered if she was still being careful not to frighten her. She matched her stride to Naddalin's without seeming impatient at the pace.

'You don't play with them?' Naddalin asked shyly.

'No, I prefer to referee - I like keeping them honest,' she explained.

'Do they like to cheat, then?'

'Oh yes - you should hear the arguments they get into! Actually, I hope you don't, you would think they were raised by a pack of wolves.'

'You sound like my mom,' Naddalin laughed, surprised.

She laughed, too. 'Well, I do think of them as my children in most ways. I never could get over my mothering instincts - did Nevaeh tell you I had lost a child?'

'No,' Naddalin murmured, stunned, scrambling to understand what lifetime she was remembering.

'Yes, my first and only baby. He died just a few days after he was born, the poor tiny thing,' she sighed. 'It broke my heart - that's why I jumped off the cliff, you know,' she added matter-of-factly.

'Nevaeh just said you f-fell,' Naddalin stammered.

'Always the gentleman.' She smiled. 'Nevaeh was the first of my new sons. I've always thought of him that way, even though he's older than I, in one way at least.' She smiled at Naddalin warmly. 'That's why I'm so happy that he's found you, dear.' The

endearment sounded very natural on her lips. 'He's been the odd man out for far too long; it's hurt me to see him alone.'

'You don't mind, then?' Naddalin asked, hesitant again. 'That I'm... all wrong for him?'

'No.' She was thoughtful. 'You're what he wants. It will work out, somehow,' she said, though her forehead creased with worry. Another peal of thunder began.

Elara stopped then; apparently, they'd reached the edge of the field. It looked as if they had formed teams. Nevaeh was far out in left field, Alistair stood between the first and second bases, and Alyson held the ball, positioned on the spot that must be the pitcher's mound.

Kael was swinging an aluminum bat; it whistled almost untraceably through the air. Naddalin waited for him to approach home plate, but then she realized, as he took his stance, that he was already there - farther from the pitcher's mound than she would have thought possible. Elody stood several feet behind him, catching for the other team. Of course, none of them had gloves.

'All right,' Elara called in a clear voice, which Naddalin knew even Nevaeh would hear, as far out as he was. 'Batter up.'

Alyson stood straight, deceptively motionless. Her style seemed to be stealth rather than an intimidating windup. She held the ball in both hands at her waist, and then, like the strike of a cobra, her right hand

flicked out and the ball smacked into Elody's hand.

'Was that a strike?' Naddalin whispered to Elara.

'If they don't hit it, it's a strike,' she told her.

Elody hurled the ball back to Alyson's waiting hand. She permitted herself a brief grin. And then her hand spun out again.

This time the bat somehow made it around in time to smash into the invisible ball. The crack of impact was shattering, thunderous; it echoed off the mountains - Naddalin immediately understood the necessity of the thunderstorm.

The ball shot like a meteor above the field, flying deep into the surrounding forest.

'Home run,' Naddalin murmured.

'Wait,' Elara cautioned, listening intently, one hand raised. Kael was a blur around the bases, Alistair shadowing him. Naddalin realized Nevaeh was missing.

'Out!' Elara cried in a clear voice. Naddalin stared in disbelief as Nevaeh sprang from the fringe of the trees, ball in his upraised hand, his wide grin visible even to her.

'Kael hits the hardest,' Elara explained, 'but Nevaeh runs the fastest.'

The inning continued before Naddalin's incredulous eyes. It was impossible to keep up with the speed at which the ball flew, the rate at which their bodies raced around the field.

Naddalin learned the other reason they waited for a thunderstorm to play when Elody, trying to avoid Nevaeh's infallible fielding, hit a ground ball toward Alistair. Alistair ran into the ball, and then raced Elody to first base. When they collided, the sound was like the crash of two massive falling boulders. Naddalin jumped up in concern, but they were somehow unscathed.

'Safe,' Elara called in a calm voice.

Kael's team was up by one - Seraphina managed to flit around the bases after tagging

up on one of Kael's long flies - when Nevaeh caught the third out. He sprinted to Naddalin's side, sparkling with excitement.

'What do you think?' he asked.

'One thing's for sure, I'll never be able to sit through dull old Major League Baseball again.'

'And it sounds like you did so much of that before,' he laughed.

'I am a little disappointed,' Naddalin teased.

'Why?' he asked, puzzled.

'Well, it would be nice if I could find just one thing you didn't do better than everyone else on the planet.'

He flashed his special crooked smile,
leaving Naddalin breathless.

'I'm up,' he said, heading for the plate.

He played intelligently, keeping the ball low, out of the reach of Seraphina's always-ready hand in the outfield, gaining two bases like lightning before Kael could get the ball back in play. Alistair knocked one so far out of the field - with a boom that hurt Naddalin's ears - that he and Nevaeh both made it in. Alyson slapped them dainty high fives.

The score constantly changed as the game continued, and they razzed each other like any street ballplayers as they took turns with the lead. Occasionally Elara would call them to

order. The thunder rumbled on, but they stayed dry, as Alyson had predicted.

Alistair was up to bat, Nevaeh catching, when Alyson suddenly gasped. Naddalin's eyes were on Nevaeh, as usual, and she saw his head snap up to look at her. Their eyes met and something flowed between them in an instant. He was at Naddalin's side before the others could ask Alyson what was wrong.

'Alyson?' Elara's voice was tense.

'I didn't see - I couldn't tell,' she whispered.

All the others were gathered by this time.

'What is it, Alyson?' Alistair asked with the calm voice of authority.

'They were traveling much quicker than I thought. I can see I had the perspective wrong before,' she murmured.

Elody leaned over her, his posture protective. 'What changed?' he asked, his voice a low rumble.

Alyson shook her head, her eyes wide and unfocused. 'It's the tracker, Elody. He's coming for Naddalin. He's faster than I saw, more focused. He's already here, almost.'

A cold dread seized Naddalin. The playful atmosphere of the game evaporated, replaced by a suffocating fear. Nevaeh's hand, cold and firm, found hers, his grip tightening.

'We have to go,' Nevaeh said, his voice a low, dangerous growl. 'Now.'

Alistair's face was grim. 'How close, Alyson?'

'Too close. He's not alone. Elody, Emmah, and Valeria are with him. They've found her scent.'

Kael let out a low, guttural sound, a predatory rumble that echoed the thunder. Seraphina's eyes, usually aloof, were sharp with alarm.

'We need to get her out,' Elara stated, her voice calm but resolute.

'There's no time for the Jeep,' Nevaeh said, his eyes scanning the treeline. 'We run.'

Naddalin's heart hammered against her ribs, a frantic drumbeat against the silence

that had fallen over the Amsels. The game, the laughter, the fleeting normalcy, were gone. Only the cold, hard reality of the hunt remained.

Chapter Seventeen: Desperate Flight

Gabriel was waiting up for Naddalin. Every light in the house blazed, a beacon of anxious paternal concern that struck her with a fresh wave of dread. Her mind, a chaotic mess of fear and desperate strategy, struggled to conjure a plausible exit. This, she knew, would be anything but pleasant.

Nevaeh's truck pulled up slowly, maintaining a deliberate distance from her own. All three of them – Nevaeh, Kael, and

Alyson – were acutely alert, rigid in their seats, their senses stretched taut across the damp, shadowed landscape, searching for any anomaly, any misplaced scent. The engine died, and the silence that followed was thick with their hyper-vigilance.

'He's not here,' Nevaeh stated, his voice a low, tense rasp. 'Let's go.' Kael, with a fluid grace that belied his immense strength, reached over to unfasten Naddalin's harness.

'Don't worry, Naddalin,' he murmured, his voice a low, reassuring rumble, 'we'll take care of things here quickly.'

A sudden welling of tears blurred Naddalin's vision as she looked at Kael. She barely knew this giant, yet the thought of not

knowing when she would see him again, after this night, twisted in her gut. It was a faint, agonizing prelude to the goodbyes she knew she had to endure in the coming moments, and the realization brought the tears spilling forth.

'Alyson, Kael.' Nevaeh's voice was a sharp command. They melted into the deepening twilight, silent as shadows, vanishing instantly. Nevaeh opened Naddalin's door, his cold hand finding hers, pulling her into the protecting enclosure of his arm. He moved swiftly towards the house, his eyes ceaselessly sweeping the night, a silent, predatory watch.

'Fifteen minutes,' he warned under his breath, the words a stark countdown.

'I can do this.' Naddalin sniffled, a sudden, desperate inspiration sparked by her own tears.

She stopped on the porch, her hands finding his face, her gaze locking fiercely with his golden eyes.

'I love you,' she whispered, her voice raw with an intensity she hadn't known she possessed. 'I will always love you, no matter what happens now.'

'Nothing is going to happen to you, Naddalin,' he countered, his voice just as fierce, just as absolute.

'Just follow the plan, okay? Keep Gabriel safe for me. He's not going to like me very

much after this, and I want to have the chance to apologize later.'

'Get inside, Naddalin. We have to hurry.'

His voice was urgent, a low thrum of barely contained power.

'One more thing,' she whispered passionately, leaning in. All she had to do was rise onto her toes to press her lips against his, cold and momentarily frozen in surprise, with every ounce of force she could muster. Then, with a sudden surge of adrenaline, she turned and kicked the door open.

'Go away, Nevaeh!' she shrieked, her voice laced with a fabricated fury, as she bolted inside, slamming the door shut on his still-shocked face.

'Naddalin?' Gabriel's voice, laced with confusion, reached her from the living room. He was already on his feet.

'Leave me alone!' she screamed at him through the torrent of tears now freely streaming down her face. She scrambled up the stairs to her room, flinging the door shut and locking it with a click that echoed ominously. She dove for her bed, fumbling on the floor beneath it for her worn duffel bag. Her hand darted between the mattress and box spring, retrieving the knotted old sock that held her secret cash hoard.

Gabriel's frantic pounding on her door punctuated her desperate movements.

'Naddalin, are you okay? What's going on?'
His voice was laced with a fear that tore at
her.

'I'm going home!' she shrieked, her voice
cracking at precisely the right moment.

'Did he hurt you?' His tone sharpened,
edging towards anger.

'No!' she shrieked, a few octaves higher.
She turned to her dresser, and Nevaeh was
already there, a silent blur, yanking out
armfuls of random clothes, which he
proceeded to toss at her.

'Did he break up with you?' Gabriel's voice
was perplexed, muffled by the door.

'No!' she yelled, slightly more breathless as she frantically shoved everything into the bag. Nevaeh, with unnerving efficiency, threw another drawer's contents at her. The bag was now bulging, almost full.

'What happened, Naddalin?' Gabriel shouted through the door, his pounding resuming.

'I broke up with him!' she screamed back, wrestling with the bag's zipper. Nevaeh's capable hands pushed hers away, zipping it smoothly, then placing the strap carefully over her arm.

'I'll be in the truck - go!' he whispered, his voice a low command, as he nudged her

towards the door. He vanished out the window, a silent phantom.

Naddalin unlocked the door and shoved past Gabriel roughly, struggling with the heavy bag as she stumbled down the stairs.

'What happened?' he yelled, right on her heels. 'I thought you liked him.'

He caught her elbow in the kitchen. Though still bewildered, his grip was firm, resolute.

He spun her around to face him, and Naddalin saw in his face a stubborn resolve, a clear intention to prevent her departure. Only one path remained, a brutal one that involved inflicting a wound so deep she hated herself for even considering it. But time was a luxury

she didn't possess; Gabriel's safety depended on this.

She glared up at her father, fresh tears stinging her eyes for the cruelty she was about to unleash.

'I do like him - that's the problem. I can't do this anymore! I can't put down any more roots here! I don't want to end up trapped in this stupid, boring town like Mom! I'm not going to make the same dumb mistake she did. I hate it - I can't stay here another minute!'

His hand dropped from her arm as if she'd electrocuted him. She turned away from his shocked, wounded face and stumbled towards the door.

'Naddalin, you can't leave now. It's nighttime,' he whispered behind her, his voice a raw plea.

She didn't turn around. 'I'll sleep in the truck if I get tired.'

'Just wait another week,' he pleaded, still shell-shocked. 'Renée will be back by then.'

This completely derailed her. 'What?'

Gabriel continued eagerly, almost babbling with relief as Naddalin hesitated. 'She called while you were out. Things aren't going so well in Florida, and if Phil doesn't get signed by the end of the week, they're going back to Arizona. The assistant coach of the Sidewinders said they might have a spot for another shortstop.'

Naddalin shook her head, trying to reassemble her now-confused thoughts. Every passing second put Gabriel in more danger.

'I have a key,' she muttered, turning the doorknob. He was too close, one hand extended towards her, his face dazed. She couldn't lose any more time arguing with him. She was going to have to hurt him further.

'Just let me go, Gabriel.' She repeated her mother's last words as she'd walked out this same door so many years ago. She said them as angrily as she could manage, and she threw the door open. 'It didn't work out, okay? I really, really hate Forks!'

Her cruel words did their job - Gabriel stayed frozen on the doorstep, stunned, while

Naddalin ran into the night. She was hideously frightened of the empty yard, the encroaching darkness. She ran wildly for the truck, visualizing a dark shadow behind her. She flung her bag into the bed and wrenched the door open. The key was waiting in the ignition.

'I'll call you tomorrow!' she yelled, wishing more than anything that she could explain everything to him right then, knowing she would never be able to. She gunned the engine and peeled out.

Nevaeh's cold hand reached for hers as the house, and Gabriel, disappeared behind them.

'Pull over,' he said, his voice calm amidst the roaring engine.

'I can drive,' she said through the tears pouring down her cheeks.

His long hands unexpectedly gripped her waist, and his foot pushed hers off the gas pedal. He pulled her across his lap, wrenching her hands free of the wheel, and with a seamless transition, he was in the driver's seat. The truck didn't swerve an inch.

'You wouldn't be able to find the house,' he explained, a hint of wry amusement in his tone.

Lights flared suddenly behind them. Naddalin stared out the back window, her eyes wide with horror.

'It's just Alyson,' he reassured her, his hand tightening around hers.

Her mind was filled with the image of Gabriel in the doorway. 'The tracker?'

'He heard the end of your performance,' Nevaeh said grimly.

'Gabriel?' Naddalin asked in dread, her voice barely a whisper.

'The tracker followed us. He's running behind us now.'

Naddalin's body went cold, a chilling realization.

'Can we outrun him?'

'No.' But he sped up as he spoke, the truck's engine whining in protest.

Her brilliant plan suddenly felt anything but.

She was staring back at Alyson's headlights when the truck shuddered violently and a dark shadow sprung up outside the window, a blur of impossible speed.

Naddalin's bloodcurdling scream lasted a fraction of a second before Nevaeh's hand clamped down on her mouth, silencing her.

'It's Kael!'

He released her mouth, his arm winding around her waist, pulling her closer.

'It's okay, Naddalin,' he promised, his voice a low, soothing murmur. 'You're going to be safe.'

They raced through the quiet town towards the north highway, the truck a roaring blur in the dark.

'I didn't realize you were still so bored with small-town life,' he said conversationally, and Naddalin knew he was attempting to distract her. 'It seemed like you were adjusting fairly well - especially recently. Maybe I was just flattering myself that I was making life more interesting for you.'

'I wasn't being nice,' Naddalin confessed, ignoring his attempt at diversion, her gaze fixed on her knees. 'That was the same thing my mom said when she left him. You could say I was hitting below the belt.'

'Don't worry. He'll forgive you.' He offered a small smile, though it didn't quite reach his eyes.

Naddalin stared at him desperately, and he saw the naked panic in her eyes.

'Naddalin, it's going to be all right.'

'But it won't be all right when I'm not with you,' she whispered, the words a fragile plea.

'We'll be together again in a few days,' he said, tightening his arm around her. 'Don't forget that this was your idea.'

'It was the best idea - of course it was mine.'

His answering smile was bleak, a fleeting shadow that disappeared almost immediately.

'Why did this happen?' Naddalin asked, her voice catching, raw with a desperate need for understanding. 'Why me?'

He stared blackly at the road ahead, his jaw tight. 'It's my fault - I was a fool to expose you like that.' The rage in his voice was directed internally, a self-lacerating fury.

'That's not what I meant,' Naddalin insisted. 'I was there, big deal. It didn't bother the other two. Why did this Nevaeh decide to kill me? There are people all over the place, why me?'

He hesitated, a long moment of contemplation before he answered.

'I got a good look at his mind tonight,' he began in a low voice. 'I'm not sure if there's

anything I could have done to avoid this, once he saw you. It is partially your fault.' His voice held a wry, almost bitter edge. 'If you didn't smell so appallingly luscious, he might not have bothered. But when I defended you... well, that made it a lot worse. He's not used to being thwarted, no matter how insignificant the object. He thinks of himself as a hunter and nothing else. His existence is consumed with tracking, and a challenge is all he asks of life. Suddenly we've presented him with a beautiful challenge - a large clan of strong fighters all bent on protecting the one vulnerable element. You wouldn't believe how euphoric he is now. It's his favorite game, and we've just made it his most exciting game ever.' His tone was thick with disgust.

He paused a moment, the silence heavy with unspoken implications.

'But if I had stood by, he would have killed you right then,' he said with hopeless frustration, a dark truth that chilled Naddalin to the bone.

'I thought... I didn't smell the same to the others... as I do to you,' Naddalin said hesitantly, a fragile hope in her voice.

'You don't. But that doesn't mean that you aren't still a temptation to every one of them. If you had appealed to the tracker - or any of them - the same way you appeal to me, it would have meant a fight right there.'

Naddalin shuddered, the reality of her predicament sinking in.

'I don't think I have any choice but to kill him now,' he muttered, his voice a grim pronouncement. 'Alistair won't like it.'

Naddalin could hear the tires cross the bridge, though she couldn't see the river in the dark. She knew they were getting close. She had to ask him now, before it was too late.

'How can you kill a vampire?'

He glanced at her, his eyes unreadable, his voice suddenly harsh, devoid of all warmth. 'The only way to be sure is to tear him to shreds, and then burn the pieces.'

'And the other two will fight with him?'

'The woman, Valeria, will. I'm not sure about Elody. They don't have a very strong

bond - he's only with them for convenience. He was embarrassed by Nevaeh in the meadow...'

'But Nevaeh and Valeria - they'll try to kill you?' Naddalin asked, her voice raw with fear for him.

'Naddalin, don't you dare waste time worrying about me. Your only concern is keeping yourself safe and - please, please - trying not to be reckless.'

'Is he still following?'

'Yes. He won't attack the house, though. Not tonight.'

He turned off onto the invisible drive, Alyson's headlights following closely behind.

They drove right up to the house. The lights inside were bright, a stark contrast to the oppressive blackness of the encroaching forest. Kael had Naddalin's door open before the truck had fully stopped; he pulled her out of the seat, tucked her like a football into his vast chest, and ran her through the door.

They burst into the large white room, Nevaeh and Alyson at their sides. All of them were there; they were already on their feet at the sound of their approach. Elody stood in their midst. Naddalin could hear low growls rumble deep in Kael's throat as he set her down next to Nevaeh.

'He's tracking us,' Nevaeh announced, glaring balefully at Elody.

Elody's face was unhappy, a mask of grim resignation. 'I was afraid of that.'

Alyson danced to Lysander's side and whispered in his ear; her lips quivered with the speed of her silent speech. They flew up the stairs together. Seraphina watched them, her eyes narrowed, and then moved quickly to Kael's side. Her beautiful eyes were intense and - when they flickered unwillingly to Naddalin's face - furious.

'What will he do?' Alistair asked Elody in chilling tones.

'I'm sorry,' he answered, his voice low. 'I was afraid, when your boy there defended her, that it would set him off.'

'Can you stop him?'

Elody shook his head. 'Nothing stops Nevaeh when he gets started.'

'We'll stop him,' Kael promised, his voice a low, dangerous rumble. There was no doubt what he meant.

'You can't bring him down. I've never seen anything like him in my three hundred years. He's absolutely lethal. That's why I joined his coven.'

His coven, Naddalin thought, a cold realization. The show of leadership in the clearing was merely that, a show.

Elody was shaking his head, a grim acceptance in his expression. He glanced at Naddalin, a flicker of perplexity in his

burgundy eyes, and then back to Alistair. 'Are you sure it's worth it?'

Nevaeh's enraged roar filled the room, a primal sound that made Naddalin flinch. Elody cringed back, startled.

Alistair looked gravely at Elody. 'I'm afraid you're going to have to make a choice.'

Elody understood. He deliberated for a moment, his eyes sweeping every face, finally settling on the bright, open room.

'I'm intrigued by the life you've created here. But I won't get in the middle of this. I bear none of you any enmity, but I won't go up against Nevaeh. I think I will head north - to that clan in Denali.' He hesitated, a flicker of caution in his eyes. 'Don't underestimate

Nevaeh. He's got a brilliant mind and unparalleled senses. He's every bit as comfortable in the human world as you seem to be, and he won't come at you head on... I'm sorry for what's been unleashed here. Truly sorry.' He bowed his head, but Naddalin saw him flicker another puzzled look at her.

'Go in peace,' was Alistair's formal, measured response.

Elody took another long look around himself, a silent farewell, and then he hurried out the door, vanishing into the night.

The silence lasted less than a second.

'How close?' Alistair looked to Nevaeh, his voice sharp with urgency.

Elara was already moving; her hand touched an inconspicuous keypad on the wall, and with a low groan of grinding metal, huge shutters began sealing up the glass wall, transforming the open room into a fortress. Naddalin gaped, a silent gasp escaping her lips.

'About three miles out past the river; he's circling around to meet up with the female, Valeria.'

'What's the plan?' Alistair asked, his gaze fixed on Nevaeh.

Nevaeh's tone was deadly, a chilling pronouncement. 'As soon as Naddalin is clear, we hunt him.'

'I guess there's no other choice,' Alistair agreed, his face grim, accepting the inevitable.

Nevaeh turned to Seraphina.

'Get her upstairs and trade clothes,' Nevaeh commanded. Seraphina stared back at him, her beautiful features contorted with livid disbelief.

'Why should I?' she hissed, her voice laced with venom. 'What is she to me? Except a menace - a danger you've chosen to inflict on all of us.'

Naddalin flinched back from the raw hatred in Seraphina's voice.

'Seraphina...' Kael murmured, his hand gently resting on her shoulder. She shook it off, her fury undiminished.

But Naddalin was watching Nevaeh carefully, knowing his volatile temper, worried about his reaction.

He surprised her. He looked away from Seraphina as if she hadn't spoken, as if she didn't exist.

'Elara?' he asked calmly, his voice a steady counterpoint to the tension.

'Of course,' Elara murmured, already moving with swift purpose.

Elara was at Naddalin's side in half a heartbeat, swinging her up easily into her

arms, and dashing up the stairs before Naddalin could even gasp in shock.

'What are we doing?' Naddalin asked breathlessly as Elara set her down in a dark room somewhere off the second-story hall.

'Trying to confuse the scent. It won't work for long, but it might help get you out.' Naddalin could hear Elara's clothes falling to the floor.

'I don't think I'll fit...' Naddalin hesitated, but Elara's hands were abruptly pulling her shirt over her head. Naddalin quickly stripped her jeans off herself. Elara handed her something; it felt like a shirt. Naddalin struggled to get her arms through the right holes. As soon as she was done Elara handed

her slacks. Naddalin yanked them on, but she couldn't get her feet out; they were too long. Elara deftly rolled the hems a few times so Naddalin could stand. Somehow Elara was already in Naddalin's clothes. She pulled Naddalin back to the stairs, where Alyson stood, a small leather bag in one hand. They each grabbed one of Naddalin's elbows and half-carried her as they flew down the stairs.

It appeared that everything had been settled downstairs in their absence. Nevaeh and Kael were ready to leave, Kael carrying a heavy-looking backpack over his shoulder. Alistair was handing something small to Elara. He turned and handed Alyson the same thing - it was a tiny silver cell phone.

'Elara and Seraphina will be taking your truck, Naddalin,' he told her as he passed. Naddalin nodded, glancing warily at Seraphina. She was glowering at Alistair with a resentful expression.

'Alyson, Elody - take the Mercedes. You'll need the dark tint in the south.'

They nodded as well.

'We're taking the Jeep.'

Naddalin was surprised to see that Alistair intended to go with Nevaeh. She realized suddenly, with a stab of fear, that they made up the hunting party.

'Alyson,' Alistair asked, 'will they take the bait?'

Everyone watched Alyson as she closed her eyes and became incredibly still, her delicate features serene.

Finally her eyes opened. 'He'll track you. The woman, Valeria, will follow the truck. We should be able to leave after that.' Her voice was certain, unwavering.

'Let's go.' Alistair began to walk toward the kitchen.

But Nevaeh was at Naddalin's side at once. He caught her up in his iron grip, crushing her to him. He seemed unaware of his watching family as he pulled her face to his, lifting her feet off the floor. For the shortest second, his lips were icy and hard against hers. Then it was over. He set her

down, still holding her face, his glorious eyes burning into hers.

His eyes went blank, curiously dead, as he turned away.

And they were gone.

They stood there, the others looking away from Naddalin as the tears streaked noiselessly down her face.

The silent moment dragged on, and then Elara's phone vibrated in her hand. She flashed it to her ear.

'Now,' she said. Seraphina stalked out the front door without another glance in Naddalin's direction, but Elara touched Naddalin's cheek as she passed.

'Be safe.' Her whisper lingered behind them as they slipped out the door. Naddalin heard her truck start thunderously, and then fade away into the night.

Elody and Alyson waited. Alyson's phone seemed to be at her ear before it even buzzed.

'Nevaeh says the woman is on Elara's trail. I'll get the car.' She vanished into the shadows the way Nevaeh had gone.

Elody and Naddalin looked at each other. Elody stood across the length of the entryway from her... being careful.

'You're wrong, you know,' he said quietly, his voice a low, steady current.

'What?' Naddalin gasped, her breath catching.

'I can feel what you're feeling now - and you are worth it.'

'I'm not,' Naddalin mumbled, shaking her head. 'If anything happens to them, it will be for nothing.'

'You're wrong,' he repeated, smiling kindly at her, a rare, gentle expression.

Naddalin heard nothing, but then Alyson stepped through the front door and came toward her with her arms held out.

'May I?' she asked, her voice soft, deferential.

'You're the first one to ask permission.'

Naddalin managed a wry, tear-streaked smile.

Alyson lifted her in her slender arms as easily as Kael had, shielding her protectively, and then they flew out the door, leaving the lights bright behind them, a silent promise of return.

Chapter Nineteen: Phoenix Refuge

When consciousness finally wrestled its way back, confusion was my first companion. My thoughts were a tangled skein, still ensnared in the lingering tendrils of dreams and nightmares, making the simple act of recognizing my surroundings a far more arduous task than it should have been. This room, with its bland decor and utilitarian

fixtures, screamed 'hotel' louder than any neon sign. The bedside lamps, bolted with an almost aggressive permanence, the drapes cut from the same unremarkable fabric as the bedspread, and the generic watercolor prints adorning the walls - all dead giveaways.

I strained to recall how I had arrived here, but at first, only a void answered. Then, fragments began to surface: the sleek black car, its windows darker than any limousine, its engine a mere whisper even as we devoured the black ribbons of freeway at speeds that mocked legality. And Alyson, a cool, unyielding presence beside me on the dark leather backseat. Sometime during that long, desperate night, my head had found a resting place against her granite neck. My proximity,

my raw vulnerability, seemed not to disturb her in the slightest. Her cool, hard skin, paradoxically, offered a strange comfort as my tears, hot and relentless, streamed down my face, dampening the front of her thin cotton shirt until my eyes, red and sore, finally ran dry.

Sleep had remained an elusive phantom. My aching eyes, despite their exhaustion, stubbornly refused to close, even as the night surrendered to dawn over some distant peak in California. The gray light, a cruel streak across a cloudless sky, stung them, yet I couldn't allow them to shut. When I did, the images that flashed, vivid as still slides behind my lids, were unbearable: Gabriel's broken expression, Nevaeh's brutal snarl, teeth bared,

Seraphina's furious glare, the keen-eyed scrutiny of the tracker, the dead, hollow look in Nevaeh's eyes after his last kiss. I couldn't bear to see them. So I fought against the crushing weariness, and the sun climbed higher.

I was still awake, still fighting, when we crested a shallow mountain pass, and the sun, now at our backs, reflected off the tiled rooftops of the Valley of the Sun. I had no emotion left to be surprised that a three-day journey had been compressed into one. I stared blankly at the wide, flat expanse laid out before me. Phoenix – the skeletal palms, the scrubby creosote, the haphazard lines of intersecting freeways, the incongruous green swaths of golf courses, and the turquoise

splotches of swimming pools, all submerged in a thin, perpetual smog and embraced by the short, rocky ridges that barely qualified as mountains.

The shadows of the palm trees slanted across the freeway - sharper, more defined than I remembered, paler than they should be. Nothing, I realized, could truly hide in these shadows. The bright, open freeway, for all its benign appearance, offered no solace, no sense of homecoming.

'Which way to the airport, Naddalin?' Lysander's voice, surprisingly soft and unalarming, broke the long night's silence, making me flinch nonetheless.

'Stay on the I-ten,' I had answered automatically, the words a reflex. 'We'll pass right by it.'

My brain, sluggish through the fog of sleep deprivation, slowly pieced together the fragments.

'Are we flying somewhere?' I had asked Alyson.

'No, but it's better to be close, just in case.'

I remembered the beginning of the loop around Sky Harbor International... but not its end. That, I supposed, must have been when the darkness finally claimed me.

Though, now that I had chased the memories down, I did have a vague impression of leaving the car – the sun just beginning its descent behind the horizon – my arm draped over Alyson's shoulder, her arm a firm anchor around my waist, dragging me along as I stumbled through the warm, dry shadows.

But this room... I had no memory of it.

I looked at the digital clock on the nightstand. Its red numbers blared 'three o'clock,' offering no distinction between night and day. No sliver of light escaped the thick curtains, yet the room was bright, illuminated by the lamps.

I rose stiffly, my muscles protesting, and staggered to the window, pulling back the heavy drapes.

It was dark outside. Three in the morning, then. My room overlooked a deserted section of the freeway and the airport's new, sprawling long-term parking garage. A small, unexpected comfort settled over me, the ability to pinpoint time and place.

I looked down at myself. I was still wearing Elara's clothes, and they fit me poorly, hanging loosely. My gaze swept the room, relief washing over me when I spotted my duffel bag atop the low dresser.

I was halfway to it, intent on finding something that fit, when a light tap on the

door made me jump, my heart leaping into my throat.

'Can I come in?' Alyson asked, her voice soft.

I took a deep, shaky breath. 'Sure.'

She glided in, her eyes assessing me cautiously. 'You look like you could sleep longer,' she observed.

I merely shook my head.

She drifted silently to the curtains, securing them tightly before turning back to me.

'We'll need to stay inside,' she told me, her voice gentle but firm.

'Okay.' My voice was hoarse, cracking with disuse.

'Thirsty?' she asked.

I shrugged. 'I'm okay. How about you?'

'Nothing unmanageable.' She offered a small, knowing smile. 'I ordered some food for you; it's in the front room. Nevaeh reminded me that you have to eat a lot more frequently than we do.'

I was instantly more alert, a flicker of hope igniting within me. 'He called?'

'No,' she said, and I felt my face fall, the brief spark extinguished. 'It was before we left.'

She took my hand carefully, leading me through the door into the living area of the hotel suite. A low buzz of voices emanated from the television. Lysander sat motionless at the desk in the corner, his eyes fixed on the news, devoid of any glimmer of interest.

I sank to the floor next to the coffee table, where a tray of food waited. I began picking at it, my mind too preoccupied to register what I was eating.

Alyson perched gracefully on the arm of the sofa, her gaze, like Lysander's, fixed blankly on the television, even as commercials now played. I pushed the tray away, my stomach abruptly uneasy. Alyson looked down at me, her dark eyes unblinking.

'What's wrong, Alyson?' I asked, a tremor in my voice.

'Nothing's wrong.' Her eyes were wide, honest... and I didn't trust them.

'What do we do now?'

'We wait for Alistair to call.'

'And should he have called by now?' I could feel the cold certainty that I was close to the truth.

Alyson's eyes flitted from mine to the silver phone resting atop her leather bag, then back again.

'What does that mean?' My voice quavered, and I fought to control the rising panic. 'That he hasn't called yet?'

'It just means that they don't have anything to tell us.'

But her voice was too even, too controlled, and the air in the room seemed to grow heavier, harder to breathe.

Lysander was suddenly beside Alyson, closer to me than usual, his presence a calming force.

'Naddalin,' he said in a suspiciously soothing voice, his hand hovering near my shoulder. 'You have nothing to worry about. You are completely safe here.'

'I know that.'

'Then why are you frightened?' he asked, a genuine confusion in his tone. He could feel

the tenor of my emotions, the raw fear, but he couldn't read the intricate reasons behind them.

'You heard what Elody said.' My voice was just a whisper, but I was certain they could hear every word. 'He said Nevaeh was lethal. What if something goes wrong, and they get separated? If something happens to any of them, Alistair, Kael... Nevaeh...' I gulped, the names catching in my throat. 'If that wild female, Valeria, hurts Elara or Seraphina...' My voice had climbed higher, a note of hysteria beginning to rise in it. 'How could I live with myself when it's my fault? None of you should be risking yourselves for me -'

'Naddalin, Naddalin, stop,' he interrupted me, his words pouring out so quickly they

were hard to understand, a torrent of reassurance. 'You're worrying about all the wrong things, Naddalin. Trust me on this - none of us are in jeopardy. You are under too much strain as it is; don't add to it with wholly unnecessary worries. Listen to me!' he ordered, for I had looked away, unable to meet his gaze. 'Our family is strong. Our only fear is losing you.'

'But why should you -'

Alyson interrupted this time, her cold fingers gently touching my cheek. 'It's been almost a century that Nevaeh's been alone. Now he's found you. You can't see the changes that we see, we who have been with him for so long. Do you think any of us want to look into

his eyes for the next hundred years if he loses you?'

My crushing guilt slowly subsided as I looked into her dark, earnest eyes. But, even as the calm spread over me, I knew I couldn't fully trust my feelings with Lysander's subtle influence permeating the air.

It was a very long day.

We remained confined to the room. Alyson called down to the front desk, requesting them to postpone our maid service. The windows remained resolutely shut, the television droned on, though neither of them truly watched it. At regular intervals, food was delivered for me, a constant reminder of my fragile humanity. The silver phone resting on

Alyson's bag seemed to grow larger, more ominous, with each passing hour.

My immortal babysitters handled the suspense with a grace I could only envy. As I fidgeted and paced, a restless caged animal, they simply grew more still, two exquisite statues whose eyes followed my every imperceptible movement. I occupied myself with memorizing the room: the striped pattern of the couches, a muted symphony of tan, peach, cream, and dull gold. Sometimes I stared at the abstract prints, randomly finding familiar shapes in the swirling colors, like I had found pictures in the clouds as a child. I traced a blue hand, a woman combing her hair, a cat stretching. But when the pale red

circle became a staring, malevolent eye, I quickly looked away.

As the afternoon wore on, I retreated to the bed, simply for something to do, a desperate attempt to escape the suffocating stillness. I hoped that, alone in the dark, I could finally give in to the terrible fears that hovered on the edge of my consciousness, unable to break through under Lysander's careful supervision.

But Alyson followed me casually, as if by some preordained coincidence she had grown tired of the front room at the exact same moment. I was beginning to wonder exactly what sort of instructions Nevaeh had given her. I lay across the bed, and she sat, legs folded, next to me, a silent guardian. I ignored

her at first, suddenly tired enough to succumb to sleep. But after a few minutes, the panic that had been held at bay by Lysander's presence began to make itself known, a cold knot tightening in my stomach. I quickly gave up on the idea of sleep, curling up into a small ball, wrapping my arms tightly around my legs.

'Alyson?' I asked, my voice small.

'Yes?'

I kept my voice very calm, carefully controlled. 'What do you think they're doing?'

'Alistair wanted to lead the tracker as far north as possible, wait for him to get close, and then turn and ambush him. Elara and Seraphina were supposed to head west as long

as they could keep the female, Valeria, behind them. If she turned around, they were to head back to Forks and keep an eye on your dad, Gabriel. So I imagine things are going well if they can't call. It means the tracker is close enough that they don't want him to overhear.'

'And Elara?'

'I think she must be back in Forks. She won't call if there's any chance the female will overhear. I expect they're all just being very careful.'

'Do you think they're safe, really?'

'Naddalin, how many times do we have to tell you that there's no danger to us?' Alyson's voice held a hint of exasperation.

'Would you tell me the truth, though?'

'Yes. I will always tell you the truth.' Her voice was earnest, unwavering.

I deliberated for a moment, weighing her words, and decided she meant it.

'Tell me then... how do you become a vampire?'

My question caught her off guard. A moment of quiet stretched between us. I rolled over to look at her, and her expression seemed ambivalent, a struggle playing out behind her dark eyes.

'Nevaeh doesn't want me to tell you that,' she said firmly, but I sensed a subtle

disagreement in her tone, a hint that her own opinion diverged from his.

'That's not fair. I think I have a right to know.'

'I know.'

I looked at her, waiting, my gaze unwavering.

She sighed, a soft, almost human sound.
'He'll be extremely angry.'

'It's none of his business. This is between you and me. Alyson, as a friend, I'm begging you.' And we were friends now, somehow – a bond forged in shared fear and unspoken understanding, as she must have known we would be all along.

She looked at me with her splendid, wise eyes... choosing.

'I'll tell you the mechanics of it,' she said finally, her voice low. 'But I don't remember it myself, and I've never done it or seen it done, so keep in mind that I can only tell you the theory.'

I waited, my breath held.

'As predators, we have a glut of weapons in our physical arsenal - much, much more than really necessary. The strength, the speed, the acute senses, not to mention those of us like Nevaeh, Lysander, and I, who have extra senses as well. And then, like a carnivorous flower, we are physically attractive to our prey.'

I remained very still, remembering how pointedly Nevaeh had demonstrated that same terrifying concept for me in the meadow.

She smiled a wide, ominous smile, a flash of something ancient and dangerous. 'We have another fairly superfluous weapon. We're also venomous,' she said, her teeth glistening, a stark, unsettling beauty. 'The venom doesn't kill - it's merely incapacitating. It works slowly, spreading through the bloodstream, so that, once bitten, our prey is in too much physical pain to escape us. Mostly superfluous, as I said. If we're that close, the prey doesn't escape. Of course, there are always exceptions. Alistair, for example.'

'So... if the venom is left to spread...' I murmured, the chilling implication dawning on me.

'It takes a few days for the transformation to be complete, depending on how much venom is in the bloodstream, how close the venom enters to the heart. As long as the heart keeps beating, the poison spreads, healing, changing the body as it moves through it. Eventually the heart stops, and the conversion is finished. But all that time, every minute of it, a victim would be wishing for death.'

I shivered, a cold dread creeping over me.

'It's not pleasant, you see.'

'Nevaeh said that it was very hard to do... I don't quite understand,' I said, my voice barely a whisper.

'We're also like sharks in a way. Once we taste the blood, or even smell it for that matter, it becomes very hard to keep from feeding. Sometimes impossible. So you see, to actually bite someone, to taste the blood, it would begin the frenzy. It's difficult on both sides - the blood-lust on the one hand, the awful pain on the other.'

'Why do you think you don't remember?'

'I don't know. For everyone else, the pain of transformation is the sharpest memory they have of their human life. I remember nothing

of being human.' Her voice was wistful, tinged with a faint, ancient sorrow.

We lay silently, wrapped in our individual meditations, the unspoken horrors of her words hanging heavy in the air.

The seconds ticked by, an eternity in the quiet room, and I had almost forgotten her presence, so enveloped was I in my own tumultuous thoughts.

Then, without any warning, Alyson leaped from the bed, landing lightly, silently, on her feet. My head jerked up, my eyes wide with startled surprise.

'Something's changed.' Her voice was urgent, a sharp edge to it, and I knew she wasn't talking to me anymore.

She reached the door at the same moment Lysander did. He had obviously heard our conversation, and her sudden exclamation. He placed his hands on her shoulders, a grounding presence, and gently guided her back to the bed, sitting her on the edge.

'What do you see?' he asked intently, his gaze fixed on her eyes. Her eyes, usually so sharp and focused, were now distant, fixed on something very far away. I sat close to her, leaning in to catch her low, quick voice.

'I see a room. It's long, and there are mirrors everywhere. The floor is wooden. He's in the room, and he's waiting. There's gold... a gold stripe across the mirrors.'

'Where is the room?' Lysander pressed, his voice calm, methodical.

'I don't know. Something is missing - another decision hasn't been made yet.'

'How much time?'

'It's soon. He'll be in the mirror room today, or maybe tomorrow. It all depends. He's waiting for something. And he's in the dark now.'

Lysander's voice remained calm, methodical, as he continued to question her, a practiced rhythm to their exchange. 'What is he doing?'

'He's watching TV... no, he's running a VCR, in the dark, in another place.'

'Can you see where he is?'

'No, it's too dark.'

'And the mirror room, what else is there?'

'Just the mirrors, and the gold. It's a band, around the room. And there's a black table with a big stereo, and a TV. He's touching the VCR there, but he doesn't watch the way he does in the dark room. This is the room where he waits.' Her eyes drifted, then focused on Lysander's face, a flicker of awareness returning.

'There's nothing else?'

She shook her head. They looked at each other, motionless, a silent exchange of grim understanding.

'What does it mean?' I asked, my voice barely a whisper.

Neither of them answered for a moment, then Lysander looked at me, his expression grave.

'It means the tracker's plans have changed. He's made a decision that will lead him to the mirror room, and the dark room.'

'But we don't know where those rooms are?'

'No.'

'But we do know that he won't be in the mountains north of Washington, being hunted. He'll elude them.' Alyson's voice was bleak, a rare note of despair.

'Should we call?' I asked, a desperate hope. They traded a serious look, their faces undecided.

And then, the sharp, insistent ring of the phone shattered the silence.

Alyson was across the room before I could even lift my head to look at it.

She pushed a button, bringing the phone to her ear, but she didn't speak first, waiting, listening.

'Alistair,' she breathed, her voice devoid of surprise or relief, a stark contrast to the emotions that surged through me. She listened for a long moment, her expression unreadable.

'Yes,' she said, glancing at me, a flicker of something in her eyes. She listened for another long moment, her stillness absolute.

'I just saw him.' She described again the vision she'd seen, her voice quick and precise. 'Whatever made him get on that plane... it was leading him to those rooms.' She paused, listening intently. 'Yes,' Alyson said into the phone, and then she spoke to me, her voice gentle. 'Naddalin?'

She held the phone out towards me. I ran to it, my heart hammering.

'Hello?' I breathed, the word a fragile whisper.

'Naddalin,' Nevaeh's voice, a familiar balm, reached me.

'Oh, Nevaeh! I was so worried.'

'Naddalin,' he sighed in frustration, the sound so unbelievably good to hear. 'I told you not to worry about anything but yourself.' I felt the hovering cloud of despair lighten, begin to drift back as he spoke, his voice a lifeline.

'Where are you?'

'We're outside of Vancouver. Naddalin, I'm sorry - we lost him. He seems suspicious of us - he's careful to stay just far enough away that I can't hear what he's thinking. But he's gone now - it looks like he got on a plane. We think he's heading back to Forks to start over.' I could hear Alyson filling in Lysander behind me, her quick words blurring together into a low, humming noise.

'I know. Alyson saw that he got away.'

'You don't have to worry, though. He won't find anything to lead him to you. You just have to stay there and wait till we find him again.'

'I'll be fine. Is Elara with Gabriel?'

'Yes - the female, Valeria, has been in town. She went to the house, but while Gabriel was at work. She hasn't gone near him, so don't be afraid. He's safe with Elara and Seraphina watching.'

'What is she doing?'

'Probably trying to pick up the trail. She's been all through the town during the night. Seraphina traced her through the airport, all

the roads around town, the school... she's digging, Naddalin, but there's nothing to find.'

'And you're sure Gabriel's safe?'

'Yes, Elara won't let him out of her sight. And we'll be there soon. If the tracker gets anywhere near Forks, we'll have him.'

'I miss you,' I whispered, the words a raw ache.

'I know, Naddalin. Believe me, I know. It's like you've taken half my self away with you.'

'Come and get it, then,' I challenged, a fragile attempt at levity.

'Soon, as soon as I possibly can. I will make you safe first.' His voice was hard, resolute.

'I love you,' I reminded him, needing to say it, to hear it.

'Could you believe that, despite everything I've put you through, I love you, too?'

'Yes, I can, actually.'

'I'll come for you soon.'

'I'll be waiting.'

As soon as the phone went dead, the insidious cloud of depression began to creep over me again, cold and heavy.

I turned to give the phone back to Alyson and found her and Lysander bent over the table, where Alyson was sketching on a piece of hotel stationery. I leaned on the back of the couch, looking over her shoulder.

She drew a room: long, rectangular, with a thinner, square section at the back. The wooden planks that made up the floor stretched lengthwise across the room. Down the walls were lines denoting the breaks in the mirrors. And then, wrapping around the walls, waist high, a long band. The band Alyson said was gold.

'It's a ballet studio,' I said, suddenly recognizing the familiar shapes, a jolt of recognition.

They looked at me, surprised.

'Do you know this room?' Lysander's voice sounded calm, but there was an undercurrent of something I couldn't identify, a subtle tension. Alyson bent her head to her work, her

hand flying across the page now, the shape of an emergency exit taking shape against the back wall, the stereo and TV on a low table by the front right corner.

'It looks like a place I used to go for dance lessons - when I was eight or nine. It was shaped just the same.' I touched the page where the square section jutted out, narrowing the back part of the room. 'That's where the bathrooms were - the doors were through the other dance floor. But the stereo was here' - I pointed to the left corner - 'it was older, and there wasn't a TV. There was a window in the waiting room - you would see the room from this perspective if you looked through it.'

Alyson and Lysander were staring at me, their expressions unreadable.

'Are you sure it's the same room?'

Lysander asked, still calm, his voice a steady probe.

'No, not at all - I suppose most dance studios would look the same - the mirrors, the bar.' I traced my finger along the ballet bar set against the mirrors. 'It's just the shape that looked familiar.' I touched the door, set in exactly the same place as the one I remembered.

'Would you have any reason to go there now?' Alyson asked, breaking my reverie, her eyes sharp.

'No, I haven't been there in almost ten years. I was a terrible dancer - they always put me in the back for recitals,' I admitted, a faint, self-deprecating smile touching my lips.

'So there's no way it could be connected with you?' Alyson asked intently, her gaze unwavering.

'No, I don't even think the same person owns it. I'm sure it's just another dance studio, somewhere.'

'Where was the studio you went to?' Lysander asked in a casual voice, too casual.

'It was just around the corner from my mom's house. I used to walk there after school...' I said, my voice trailing off, the

implications dawning on me. I didn't miss the significant look they exchanged.

'Here in Phoenix, then?' His voice was still casual, but the question was a trap.

'Yes,' I whispered, the word a heavy weight. 'Fifty-eighth Street and Cactus.'

We all sat in silence, staring at the drawing, the air thick with unspoken dread.

'Alyson, is that phone safe?' I asked, my voice barely audible.

'Yes,' she reassured me. 'The number would just trace back to Washington.'

'Then I can use it to call my mom.'

'I thought she was in Florida.'

'She is - but she's coming home soon, and she can't come back to that house while...' My voice trembled, the unspoken threat of Valeria and Nevaeh hanging heavy in the air. I was thinking about something Nevaeh had said, about the red-haired female at Gabriel's house, at the school, where my records would be.

'How will you reach her?' Alyson asked.

'They don't have a permanent number except at the house - she's supposed to check her messages regularly.'

'Lysander?' Alyson asked, turning to him.

He thought about it, his brow furrowed in concentration. 'I don't think there's any way it

could hurt - be sure you don't say where you are, of course.'

I reached eagerly for the phone, the silver device a lifeline, and dialed the familiar number. It rang four times, and then I heard my mom, Renée's, breezy voice telling me to leave a message.

'Mom,' I said after the beep, my voice tight with urgency, 'it's me. Listen, I need you to do something. It's important. As soon as you get this message, call me at this number.' Alyson was already at my side, her hand flying across a piece of hotel stationery, writing the number for me at the bottom of her picture. I read it carefully, twice, committing it to memory.

'Please don't go anywhere until you talk to me. Don't worry, I'm okay, but I have to talk to you

right away, no matter how late you get this call, all right? I love you, Mom. Bye.' I closed my eyes and prayed with all my might that no unforeseen change of plans would bring her home before she got my message.

I settled into the sofa, nibbling on a plate of leftover fruit, anticipating a long, agonizing evening. I thought about calling Gabriel, but I wasn't sure if I should be home by now or not. I concentrated on the news, watching out for stories about Florida, or about spring training - strikes or hurricanes or terrorist attacks - anything that might send them home early.

Immortality, I mused, must grant endless patience. Neither Lysander nor Alyson seemed to feel the need to do anything at all. For a while, Alyson sketched the vague outline of the

dark room from her vision, as much as she could discern in the dim light from the television. But when she was done, she simply sat, looking at the blank walls with her timeless eyes. Lysander, too, seemed to have no urge to pace, or peek through the curtains, or run screaming out the door, the way I did.

I must have fallen asleep on the couch, the phone clutched in my hand, waiting for it to ring again. The touch of Alyson's cold hands woke me briefly as she carried me to the bed, a fleeting moment of awareness, but I was unconscious again before my head even touched the pillow.

Chapter Twenty: Unavoidable Choice

I could feel it was too early again when I woke, the dim light of the hotel room confirming my internal clock's disarray. My days and nights, I realized, were slowly reversing, a subtle shift mirroring the chaos of my new reality. I lay in my bed, listening to the quiet, almost imperceptible voices of Alyson and Lysander in the other room. That they were loud enough for me to hear at all was strange, a testament to their heightened senses or my own growing awareness. I rolled until my feet touched the cool floor, then staggered towards the living room.

The digital clock on the television screen glowed, announcing it was just after two in the morning. Alyson and Lysander sat together on the sofa, Alyson sketching again, her hand a

blur of motion, while Lysander leaned over her shoulder, engrossed in her work. They didn't look up when I entered, too consumed by Alyson's evolving vision.

I crept to Lysander's side, my breath held, to peek at the unfolding image.

'Did she see something more?' I asked him quietly, my voice a fragile whisper in the stillness.

'Yes. Something's brought him back to the room with the VCR, but it's light now.'

I watched, mesmerized, as Alyson's hand swiftly rendered a square room with dark beams crisscrossing its low ceiling. The walls were paneled in wood, a little too dark, a touch out of date. The floor was covered in a

dark carpet, a subtle pattern woven into its depths. A large window, prominent against the south wall, promised daylight, while an opening through the west wall led to what must be a living room. One side of that entrance was stone – a massive, tan stone fireplace, open to both rooms, dominating the space. The focal point of the room from this perspective, the television and VCR, balanced precariously on a too-small wooden stand in the southwest corner. An aged sectional sofa curved around in front of the TV, a round coffee table centered before it.

'The phone goes there,' I whispered, my finger tracing the empty space on the drawing.

Two pairs of eternal eyes, dark and knowing, stared at me.

'That's my mother's house.'

Alyson was already off the couch, the silver phone in her hand, dialing with a speed that defied human perception. I stared, numb with a growing dread, at the precise rendering of my mother's familiar family room.

Uncharacteristically, Lysander slid closer to me on the sofa. He lightly touched his hand to my shoulder, and the physical contact seemed to amplify his calming influence, a subtle wave of tranquility washing over me. The panic, though present, remained dull, unfocused, held at bay by his presence.

Alyson's lips trembled with the speed of her words, a low, indecipherable buzzing that I couldn't decipher, couldn't concentrate on.

'Naddalin,' Alyson said, her voice cutting through the haze. I looked at her numbly, my mind still reeling.

'Naddalin, Nevaeh is coming to get you. He and Kael and Alistair are going to take you somewhere, to hide you for a while.'

'Nevaeh is coming?' The words were like a life vest, buoyant and strong, holding my head above the rising flood of despair.

'Yes, he's catching the first flight out of Seattle. We'll meet him at the airport, and you'll leave with him.'

'But, my mother... he came here for my mother, Alyson!' Despite Lysander's calming presence, the hysteria bubbled up in my voice, raw and uncontrollable.

'Lysander and I will stay until she's safe.'

'I can't win, Alyson. You can't guard everyone I know forever. Don't you see what he's doing? He's not tracking me at all. He'll find someone, he'll hurt someone I love...
Alyson, I can't -'

'We'll catch him, Naddalin,' she assured me, her voice firm, unwavering.

'And what if you get hurt, Alyson? Do you think that's okay with me? Do you think it's only my human family he can hurt me with?'

Alyson looked meaningfully at Lysander, a silent communication passing between them. A deep, heavy fog of lethargy washed over me, thick and suffocating, and my eyes closed without my permission, my mind struggling

against the encroaching darkness, realizing what was happening. I forced my eyes open, a desperate effort, and stood up, stepping away from Lysander's hand, breaking the connection.

'I don't want to go back to sleep,' I snapped, my voice sharp with defiance.

I walked to my room and shut the door, slammed it, really, the sound echoing the turmoil within me, so I could be free to unravel privately. This time Alyson didn't follow me. For three and a half agonizing hours, I stared at the wall, curled in a tight ball, rocking back and forth, a desperate attempt to soothe the tempest raging inside. My mind went around in endless circles, trying to conjure some way out of this nightmare.

There was no escape, no reprieve. I could see only one possible end looming darkly in my future, a terrifying inevitability. The only question was how many other people would be hurt before I reached it.

The only solace, the only fragile hope I had left, was the knowledge that I would see Nevaeh soon. Maybe, if I could just see his face again, I would also be able to discern the solution that so cruelly eluded me now.

When the phone rang, its shrill sound piercing the oppressive silence, I returned to the front room, a little ashamed of my earlier behavior. I hoped I hadn't offended either of them, that they would understand how profoundly grateful I was for the immense sacrifices they were making on my account.

Alyson was talking as rapidly as ever, her words a low, continuous hum, but what truly caught my attention was that, for the first time since our arrival, Lysander was not in the room. I looked at the clock – it was five-thirty in the morning.

'They're just boarding their plane,' Alyson told me, her voice calm, almost detached. 'They'll land at nine-forty-five.' Just a few more hours, I thought, to keep breathing, to keep holding on, until he was here.

'Where's Lysander?'

'He went to check out.'

'You aren't staying here?'

'No, we're relocating closer to your mother's house.'

My stomach twisted uneasily at her words, a cold knot of dread forming.

But the phone rang again, its sudden demand for attention distracting me. Alyson looked surprised, a rare flicker of emotion on her serene face, but I was already walking forward, my hand reaching hopefully for the receiver.

'Hello?' Alyson asked, her voice cautious. 'No, she's right here.' She held the phone out to me, her lips silently forming the words: Your mother.

'Hello?' I whispered, my voice barely audible.

'Naddalin? Naddalin?' It was my mother's voice, a familiar tone I had heard a thousand times in my childhood, anytime I'd gotten too close to the edge of the sidewalk or strayed out of her sight in a crowded place. It was the unmistakable sound of raw panic.

I sighed, a long, weary exhalation. I'd been expecting this, though I had tried to craft my message as unalarming as possible without lessening its urgency.

'Calm down, Mom,' I said in my most soothing voice, walking slowly away from Alyson, putting distance between us. I wasn't sure if I could lie as convincingly with her keen eyes fixed on me. 'Everything is fine, okay? Just give me a minute and I'll explain everything, I promise.'

I paused, surprised that she hadn't interrupted me yet, a strange silence on the other end of the line.

'Mom?'

'Be very careful not to say anything until I tell you to.' The voice I heard now was as unfamiliar as it was unexpected. It was a man's tenor voice, a very pleasant, generic voice – the kind of voice that you heard in the background of luxury car commercials. He spoke very quickly, a chilling calm in his tone.

'Now, I don't need to hurt your mother, so please do exactly as I say, and she'll be fine.'
He paused for a minute, allowing his words to sink in, while I listened in mute horror, my blood turning to ice. 'That's very good,' he

congratulated, his voice still amused, still light and friendly, a terrifying contrast to his words. 'Now repeat after me, and do try to sound natural. Please say, 'No, Mom, stay where you are.'"

'No, Mom, stay where you are.' My voice was barely more than a whisper, a fragile thread of sound.

'I can see this is going to be difficult.' The voice was amused, still light and friendly, a chilling mockery. 'Why don't you walk into another room now so your face doesn't ruin everything? There's no reason for your mother to suffer. As you're walking, please say, 'Mom, please listen to me.' Say it now.'

'Mom, please listen to me,' my voice pleaded, a desperate, raw sound. I walked very slowly to the bedroom, feeling Alyson's worried stare burning into my back. I shut the door behind me, the click of the lock a final, desperate act, trying to think clearly through the terror that gripped my brain, squeezing it tight.

'There now, are you alone? Just answer yes or no.'

'Yes.'

'But they can still hear you, I'm sure.'

'Yes.'

'All right, then,' the agreeable voice continued, its pleasant tone a sinister

counterpoint to the gravity of his words, 'say,
'Mom, trust me.'

'Mom, trust me.'

'This worked out rather better than I
expected. I was prepared to wait, but your
mother arrived ahead of schedule. It's easier
this way, isn't it? Less suspense, less anxiety
for you.'

I waited, my heart hammering against my
ribs, a frantic drumbeat of fear.

'Now I want you to listen very carefully.
I'm going to need you to get away from your
friends; do you think you can do that? Answer
yes or no.'

'No.' The word escaped before I could stop it, a desperate defiance.

'I'm sorry to hear that. I was hoping you would be a little more creative than that. Do you think you could get away from them if your mother's life depended on it? Answer yes or no.'

Somehow, there had to be a way. I remembered our destination: the airport. Sky Harbor International Airport: crowded, confusingly laid out, a labyrinth of terminals and concourses...

'Yes.' The word was a desperate prayer.

'That's better. I'm sure it won't be easy, but if I get the slightest hint that you have any company, well, that would be very bad for your

mother,' the friendly voice promised, his words a chilling threat. 'You must know enough about us by now to realize how quickly I would know if you tried to bring anyone along with you. And how little time I would need to deal with your mother if that was the case. Do you understand? Answer yes or no.'

'Yes.' My voice broke, a raw, choked sound.

'Very good, Naddalin. Now this is what you have to do. I want you to go to your mother's house. Next to the phone there will be a number. Call it, and I'll tell you where to go from there.' I already knew where I would go, and where this would ultimately end. But I would follow his instructions exactly, a

desperate gamble. 'Can you do that? Answer yes or no.'

'Yes.'

'Before noon, please, Naddalin. I haven't got all day,' he said politely, a chilling politeness that made my skin crawl.

'Where's Phil?' I asked tersely, my voice tight with a sudden, desperate hope.

'Ah, be careful now, Naddalin. Wait until I ask you to speak, please.'

I waited, my jaw clenched, the silence screaming around me.

'It's important, now, that you don't make your friends suspicious when you go back to them. Tell them that your mother called, and

that you talked her out of coming home for the time being. Now repeat after me, 'Thank you, Mom.' Say it now.'

'Thank you, Mom.' The tears were coming now, hot and relentless. I tried to fight them back, to keep my voice steady.

'Say, 'I love you, Mom, I'll see you soon.' Say it now.'

'I love you, Mom.' My voice was thick, choked with unshed tears. 'I'll see you soon,' I promised, a lie that tasted like ash.

'Goodbye, Naddalin. I look forward to seeing you again.' He hung up, the click of the phone a death knell.

I held the phone to my ear, my joints frozen with terror – I couldn't unbend my fingers to drop it.

I knew I had to think, to plan, but my head was filled with the echoing sound of my mother's panic, a relentless torment. Seconds ticked by, an eternity, while I fought for control, for a shred of clarity.

Slowly, agonizingly slowly, my thoughts began to break past that brick wall of pain, to form a plan. For I had no choices now but one: to go to the mirrored room and die. I had no guarantees, nothing to give to keep my mother alive. I could only hope that Nevaeh would be satisfied with winning the game, that beating Nevaeh would be enough. Despair gripped me, a cold, suffocating hand; there was no way to

bargain, nothing I could offer or withhold that could influence him. But I still had no choice. I had to try.

I pushed the terror back as well as I could, burying it deep. My decision was made. It did no good to waste time agonizing over the outcome. I had to think clearly, because Alyson and Lysander were waiting for me, and evading them was absolutely essential, and absolutely impossible.

I was suddenly grateful that Lysander was gone. If he had been here to feel my anguish in the last five minutes, how could I have kept them from being suspicious? I choked back the dread, the anxiety, tried to stifle it, to push it down. I couldn't afford it now. I didn't know when he would return.

I concentrated on my escape. I had to hope that my intimate familiarity with the airport would somehow turn the odds in my favor. Somehow, I had to keep Alyson away...

I knew Alyson was in the other room waiting for me, curious, her keen senses undoubtedly picking up on the subtle shifts in my demeanor. But I had to deal with one more thing in private, before Lysander was back.

I had to accept that I wouldn't see Nevaeh again, not even one last glimpse of his face to carry with me to the mirror room. I was going to hurt him, and I couldn't say goodbye. I let the waves of torture wash over me, have their way for a time, a brief, agonizing surrender. Then I pushed them back, too, sealing them away, and went to face Alyson.

The only expression I could manage was a dull, dead look, a mask of carefully constructed emptiness. I saw her alarm, a flicker of concern in her dark eyes, and I didn't wait for her to ask. I had just one script, one carefully rehearsed performance, and I knew I'd never manage improvisation now.

'My mom was worried, she wanted to come home. But it's okay, I convinced her to stay away.' My voice was lifeless, flat, devoid of emotion.

'We'll make sure she's fine, Naddalin, don't worry.' Alyson's voice was gentle, but I could hear the underlying caution.

I turned away; I couldn't let her see my face, the raw pain that surely lingered there.

My eye fell on a blank page of the hotel stationery on the desk. I went to it slowly, a desperate plan forming in my mind. There was an envelope there, too. That was good.

'Alyson,' I asked slowly, without turning, keeping my voice level, carefully controlled. 'If I write a letter for my mother, would you give it to her? Leave it at the house, I mean.'

'Sure, Naddalin.' Her voice was careful, a subtle shift in her tone. She could see me coming apart at the seams, I knew. I had to keep my emotions under tighter control.

I went into the bedroom again, and knelt next to the little bedside table to write.

'Nevaeh,' I wrote. My hand was shaking, the letters hardly legible, blurring on the page.

I love you. I am so sorry. He has my mom, and I have to try. I know it may not work. I am so very, very sorry.

Don't be angry with Alyson and Lysander. If I get away from them it will be a miracle. Tell them thank you for me. Alyson especially, please.

And please, please, don't come after him. That's what he wants. I think. I can't bear it if anyone has to be hurt because of me, especially you. Please, this is the only thing I can ask you now. For me.

I love you. Forgive me.

Naddalin

I folded the letter carefully, my fingers trembling, and sealed it in the envelope. Eventually he would find it, I knew. I only hoped he would understand, and listen to me just this once.

And then I carefully sealed away my heart, locking it behind a wall of ice, preparing for the inevitable.

Chapter Twenty One: Hunter's Lair

I could feel it was too early again when I woke, the dim light of the hotel room confirming my internal clock's disarray. My days and nights, I realized, were slowly reversing, a subtle shift mirroring the chaos of my new reality. I lay in my bed, listening to the quiet, almost imperceptible voices of Alyson

and Lysander in the other room. That they were loud enough for me to hear at all was strange, a testament to their heightened senses or my own growing awareness. I rolled until my feet touched the cool floor, then staggered towards the living room.

The digital clock on the television screen glowed, announcing it was just after two in the morning. Alyson and Lysander sat together on the sofa, Alyson sketching again, her hand a blur of motion, while Lysander leaned over her shoulder, engrossed in her work. They didn't look up when I entered, too consumed by Alyson's evolving vision.

I crept to Lysander's side, my breath held, to peek at the unfolding image.

'Did she see something more?' I asked him quietly, my voice a fragile whisper in the stillness.

'Yes. Something's brought him back to the room with the DVR, but it's light now.'

I watched, mesmerized, as Alyson's hand swiftly rendered a square room with dark beams crisscrossing its low ceiling. The walls were paneled in wood, a little too dark, a touch out of date. The floor was covered in a dark carpet, a subtle pattern woven into its depths. A large window, prominent against the south wall, promised daylight, while an opening through the west wall led to what must be a living room. One side of that entrance was stone – a massive, tan stone fireplace, open to both rooms, dominating the

space. The focal point of the room from this perspective, the television and DVR, balanced precariously on a too-small wooden stand in the southwest corner. An aged sectional sofa curved around in front of the screen, a round coffee table centered before it.

'The phone goes there,' I whispered, my finger tracing the empty space on the drawing.

Two pairs of eternal eyes, dark and knowing, stared at me.

'That's my mother's house.'

Alyson was already off the couch, the silver phone in her hand, dialing with a speed that defied human perception. I stared, numb with a growing dread, at the precise rendering of my mother's familiar family room.

Uncharacteristically, Lysander slid closer to me on the sofa. He lightly touched his hand to my shoulder, and the physical contact seemed to amplify his calming influence, a subtle wave of tranquility washing over me. The panic, though present, remained dull, unfocused, held at bay by his presence.

Alyson's lips trembled with the speed of her words, a low, indecipherable buzzing that I couldn't decipher, couldn't concentrate on.

'Naddalin,' Alyson said, her voice cutting through the haze. I looked at her numbly, my mind still reeling.

'Naddalin, Nevaeh is coming to get you. He and Kael and Alistair are going to take you somewhere, to hide you for a while.'

'Nevaeh is coming?' The words were like a life vest, buoyant and strong, holding my head above the rising flood of despair.

'Yes, he's catching the first flight out of Seattle. We'll meet him at the airport, and you'll leave with him.'

'But, my mother... he came here for my mother, Alyson!' Despite Lysander's calming presence, the hysteria bubbled up in my voice, raw and uncontrollable.

'Lysander and I will stay until she's safe.'

'I can't win, Alyson. You can't guard everyone I know forever. Don't you see what he's doing? He's not tracking me at all. He'll find someone, he'll hurt someone I love...
Alyson, I can't -'

'We'll catch him, Naddalin,' she assured me, her voice firm, unwavering.

'And what if you get hurt, Alyson? Do you think that's okay with me? Do you think it's only my human family he can hurt me with?'

Alyson looked meaningfully at Lysander, a silent communication passing between them. A deep, heavy fog of lethargy washed over me, thick and suffocating, and my eyes closed without my permission, my mind struggling against the encroaching darkness, realizing what was happening. I forced my eyes open, a desperate effort, and stood up, stepping away from Lysander's hand, breaking the connection.

'I don't want to go back to sleep,' I snapped, my voice sharp with defiance.

I walked to my room and shut the door, slammed it, really, the sound echoing the turmoil within me, so I could be free to unravel privately. This time Alyson didn't follow me. For three and a half agonizing hours, I stared at the wall, curled in a tight ball, rocking back and forth, a desperate attempt to soothe the tempest raging inside. My mind went around in endless circles, trying to conjure some way out of this nightmare. There was no escape, no reprieve. I could see only one possible end looming darkly in my future, a terrifying inevitability. The only question was how many other people would be hurt before I reached it.

The only solace, the only fragile hope I had left, was the knowledge that I would see Nevaeh soon. Maybe, if I could just see his face again, I would also be able to discern the solution that so cruelly eluded me now.

When the phone rang, its shrill sound piercing the oppressive silence, I returned to the front room, a little ashamed of my earlier behavior. I hoped I hadn't offended either of them, that they would understand how profoundly grateful I was for the immense sacrifices they were making on my account.

Alyson was talking as rapidly as ever, her words a low, continuous hum, but what truly caught my attention was that, for the first time since our arrival, Lysander was not in the

room. I looked at the clock – it was five-thirty in the morning.

'They're just boarding their plane,' Alyson told me, her voice calm, almost detached.

'They'll land at nine-forty-five.' Just a few more hours, I thought, to keep breathing, to keep holding on, until he was here.

'Where's Lysander?'

'He went to check out.'

'You aren't staying here?'

'No, we're relocating closer to your mother's house.'

My stomach twisted uneasily at her words, a cold knot of dread forming.

But the phone rang again, its sudden demand for attention distracting me. Alyson looked surprised, a rare flicker of emotion on her serene face, but I was already walking forward, my hand reaching hopefully for the receiver.

'Hello?' Alyson asked, her voice cautious. 'No, she's right here.' She held the phone out to me, her lips silently forming the words: Your mother.

'Hello?' I whispered, my voice barely audible.

'Naddalin? Naddalin?' It was my mother's voice, a familiar tone I had heard a thousand times in my childhood, anytime I'd gotten too close to the edge of the sidewalk or strayed

out of her sight in a crowded place. It was the unmistakable sound of raw panic.

I sighed, a long, weary exhalation. I'd been expecting this, though I had tried to craft my message as unalarming as possible without lessening its urgency.

'Calm down, Mom,' I said in my most soothing voice, walking slowly away from Alyson, putting distance between us. I wasn't sure if I could lie as convincingly with her keen eyes fixed on me. 'Everything is fine, okay? Just give me a minute and I'll explain everything, I promise.'

I paused, surprised that she hadn't interrupted me yet, a strange silence on the other end of the line.

'Mom?'

'Be very careful not to say anything until I tell you to.' The voice- I heard now now wasn't my mother's- lost in my head and thoughts- the first time I heard the voices in my mind of others.

Chapter twenty two: Maybe Choices

When consciousness finally wrestled its way back, confusion was my first companion. My thoughts were a tangled skein, still ensnared in the lingering tendrils of dreams and nightmares, making the simple act of recognizing my surroundings a far more arduous task than it should have been. This room, with its bland decor and utilitarian fixtures, screamed 'hotel' louder than any neon

sign. The bedside lamps, bolted with an almost aggressive permanence, the drapes cut from the same unremarkable fabric as the bedspread, and the generic watercolor prints adorning the walls – all dead giveaways.

I strained to recall how I had arrived here, but at first, only a void answered. Then, fragments began to surface: the sleek black car, its windows darker than any limousine, its engine a mere whisper even as we devoured the black ribbons of freeway at speeds that mocked legality. And Alyson, a cool, unyielding presence beside me on the dark leather backseat. Sometime during that long, desperate night, my head had found a resting place against her granite neck. My proximity, my raw vulnerability, seemed not to disturb

her in the slightest. Her cool, hard skin, paradoxically, offered a strange comfort as my tears, hot and relentless, streamed down my face, dampening the front of her thin cotton shirt until my eyes, red and sore, finally ran dry.

Sleep had remained an elusive phantom. My aching eyes, despite their exhaustion, stubbornly refused to close, even as the night surrendered to dawn over some distant peak in California. The gray light, a cruel streak across a cloudless sky, stung them, yet I couldn't allow them to shut. When I did, the images that flashed, vivid as still slides behind my lids, were unbearable: Gabriel's broken expression, Nevaeh's brutal snarl, teeth bared, Seraphina's furious glare, the keen-eyed

scrutiny of the tracker, the dead, hollow look in Nevaeh's eyes after his last kiss. I couldn't bear to see them. So I fought against the crushing weariness, and the sun climbed higher.

I was still awake, still fighting, when we crested a shallow mountain pass, and the sun, now at our backs, reflected off the tiled rooftops of the Valley of the Sun. I had no emotion left to be surprised that a three-day journey had been compressed into one. I stared blankly at the wide, flat expanse laid out before me. Phoenix – the skeletal palms, the scrubby creosote, the haphazard lines of intersecting freeways, the incongruous green swaths of golf courses, and turquoise splotches of swimming pools, all submerged in

a thin, perpetual smog and embraced by the short, rocky ridges that barely qualified as mountains.

The shadows of the palm trees slanted across the freeway - sharper, more defined than I remembered, paler than they should be. Nothing, I realized, could truly hide in these shadows. The bright, open freeway, for all its benign appearance, offered no solace, no sense of homecoming.

'Which way to the airport, Naddalin?' Lysander's voice, surprisingly soft and un-alarmed, broke the long night's silence, making me flinch nonetheless.

'Stay on the I-ten,' I had answered automatically, the words a reflex. 'We'll pass right by it.'

My brain, sluggish through the fog of sleep deprivation, slowly pieced together the fragments.

'Are we flying somewhere?' I had asked Alyson.

'No, but it's better to be close, just in case.'

I remembered beginning the loop around in the starts of the lingerings.

The voice I heard now was as unfamiliar as it was unexpected. It was a man's tenor, a very pleasant, generic voice – the kind you heard in

the background of luxury car commercials. He spoke very quickly, a chilling calm in his tone.

'Now, I don't need to hurt your mother, so please do exactly as I say, and she'll be fine.'

He paused for a minute, allowing his words to sink in, while I listened in mute horror, my blood turning to ice. 'That's very good,' he congratulated, his voice still amused, still light and friendly, a terrifying contrast to his words. 'Now repeat after me, and do try to sound natural. Please say, 'No, Mom, stay where you are.'"

'No, Mom, stay where you are.' My voice was barely more than a whisper, a fragile thread of sound.

'I can see this is going to be difficult.' The voice was amused, still light and friendly, a chilling mockery. 'Why don't you walk into another room now so your face doesn't ruin everything? There's no reason for your mother to suffer. As you're walking, please say, that everything is okay- *say its okay- even if its just in your mind its now in her mind.*

The voice, still light and friendly, held a chilling amusement as it cut through the silence. 'I can see this is going to be difficult.' A cold knot formed in your stomach. 'Why don't you walk into another room now so your face doesn't ruin everything?' The casual suggestion sent a shiver down your spine, the implication clear: your

expression, your fear, could somehow betray the charade. 'There's no reason for your mother to suffer.'

Each word was a measured, precise blow, designed to incapacitate, to paralyze with a unique brand of terror. And then the instruction came, a twisted, psychological command that made your blood run cold: 'As you're walking, please say, that everything is okay-say it's okay-even if it's just in your mind it's now in her mind.' The words echoed, a demand for a performance, a forced internal monologue of reassurance that was anything but. You were to be the unwitting ventriloquist of calm, projecting an illusion for someone you loved, even as your own world shattered.

The metallic click of the phone disconnecting echoed in the small bedroom, a sound that sealed my fate. My joints, rigid with a terror that had sunk deep into my bones, refused to unbend. The receiver remained glued to my ear, my fingers locked in an unyielding grip. I knew I had to think, to plan, but my mind was a cacophony of my mother's panicked voice, a relentless torment. Seconds bled into an eternity as I fought for control, for a single shred of clarity.

Slowly, agonizingly slowly, my thoughts began to pierce the brick wall of pain that had enveloped me, to form a desperate, fragile plan. For I had no choices now but one: to go to the mirrored room and die. There were no guarantees, nothing I could offer to ensure my

mother's survival. I could only cling to the desperate hope that Nevaeh would be satisfied with winning his twisted game, that beating Nevaeh would be enough. Despair, cold and suffocating, gripped me; there was no way to bargain, nothing I could offer or withhold that could influence him. But I still had no choice. I had to try.

I pushed the terror back, burying it deep within me. My decision was made. There was no point in wasting precious time agonizing over the outcome. I had to think clearly, for Alyson and Lysander were waiting, and evading them was not merely essential, but, it seemed, absolutely impossible.

A wave of perverse gratitude washed over me, a chilling realization that Lysander was

not in the room. If he had been here, if he had felt the raw anguish that had consumed me in the last five minutes, how could I possibly have kept them from suspicion? I choked back the dread, the anxiety, stifling it, pushing it down. I couldn't afford it now. I didn't know when he would return.

My focus narrowed, sharpening on my escape. I had to hope that my intimate, almost innate, familiarity with Sky Harbor International Airport would somehow tip the odds, however slightly, in my favor. Somehow, I had to keep Alyson away.

I knew Alyson was in the other room, waiting for me, her keen senses undoubtedly already picking up on the subtle shifts in my demeanor, the tremor in my carefully

constructed facade. But I had to deal with one more thing in private, before Lysander's return.

I had to accept that I wouldn't see Nevaeh again, not even one last glimpse of his perfect face to carry with me to the mirrored room. I was going to hurt him, to leave him with a wound that might never heal, and I couldn't even say goodbye. I let the waves of torture wash over me, a brief, agonizing surrender, allowing them to have their way for a time. Then, with a fierce, desperate will, I pushed them back, too, sealing them away behind a wall of ice, preparing myself for the inevitable. I walked back to face Alyson.

The only expression I could manage was a dull, dead look, a mask of carefully

constructed emptiness. I saw the flicker of alarm in her dark eyes, a brief moment of concern, and I didn't wait for her to ask. I had just one script, one carefully rehearsed performance, and I knew I'd never manage improvisation now.

'My mom was worried, she wanted to come home. But it's okay, I convinced her to stay away.' My voice was lifeless, flat, devoid of emotion, a monotone that I hoped would pass for exhaustion.

'We'll make sure she's fine, Naddalin, don't worry.' Alyson's voice was gentle, but I could hear the underlying caution, the subtle shift in her tone.

I turned away, unable to let her see my face, the raw pain that surely lingered there, threatening to shatter my carefully built composure.

My eye fell on a blank page of the hotel stationery on the desk. I went to it slowly, a desperate plan solidifying in my mind. There was an envelope there, too. That was good.

'Alyson,' I asked slowly, without turning, keeping my voice level, carefully controlled. 'If I write a letter for my mother, would you give it to her? Leave it at the house, I mean.'

'Sure, Naddalin.' Her voice was careful, a subtle shift in her tone. She could see me coming apart at the seams, I knew. I had to keep my emotions under tighter control.

I went into the bedroom again, and knelt next to the little bedside table to write.

'Nevaeh,' I wrote. My hand was shaking, the letters hardly legible, blurring on the page as tears threatened to spill.

I love you. I am so sorry. He has my mom, and I have to try. I know it may not work. I am so very, very sorry.

Don't be angry with Alyson and Lysander. If I get away from them it will be a miracle. Tell them thank you for me. Alyson especially, please.

And please, please, don't come after him. That's what he wants. I think. I can't bear it if anyone has to be hurt because of me,

especially you. Please, this is the only thing I
can ask you now. For me.

I love you. Forgive me.

Naddalin

I folded the letter carefully, my fingers
trembling, and sealed it in the envelope.
Eventually he would find it, I knew. I only
hoped he would understand, and listen to me
just this once.

And then I carefully sealed away my heart,
locking it behind a wall of ice, preparing for
the inevitable.

*I am the hunted... the eyes look into my
soul!*

Echoes of Eternity...

'Come on, then,' Nevaeh encouraged, his smile widening over his brilliant teeth, his hand pulling me along. 'I'll show you.'

We started back down the long hall, my hand still clasped in his, his touch cool and comforting against my skin. The honey-colored wood paneling seemed to glow in the soft light, reflecting the quiet elegance of their world. As we walked, Nevaeh continued his narrative, his voice a low, mesmerizing murmur, weaving a tapestry of history that stretched back centuries.

'Alistair's transformation was... unique,' he began, his gaze distant, lost in the echoes of the past. 'Most of us are changed in moments of extreme vulnerability, on the brink of death, or in the throes of a primal hunt. But Alistair...

he was already bleeding, yes, but he was still fighting. He had cornered the ancient vampire, the one who bit him, in the sewers. He was driven by a righteous fury, a belief in eradicating evil. The vampire, weakened by hunger and the mob's pursuit, lashed out. It was a desperate act, not a deliberate creation.'

He paused, and I could feel the weight of the untold details, the parts he had edited from the story. 'What happened to the vampire who bit him?' I asked, my voice barely a whisper.

Nevaeh's jaw tightened almost imperceptibly. 'Alistair killed him. It was a brutal fight, even in his weakened state. The mob, still following the scent of the third man the vampire had taken, eventually found the

alley. They found Alistair, bleeding, but alive. He knew what his father would do – the burning, the eradication of anything touched by the 'fiend.' He crawled away, hid, and endured the transformation alone.'

'Three days in rotting potatoes,' I murmured, the image chilling me.

'A testament to his tenacity,' Nevaeh agreed, a flicker of pride in his eyes. 'And his compassion. Even then, he understood that the monster wasn't just evil, but a creature driven by hunger, by instinct. He saw the tragedy in it, not just the sin.'

We passed a closed door. 'Rosalie and Kael's room,' Nevaeh murmured, gesturing. 'They prefer the upper floors, more light.'

Another door. 'Alistair's office. He spends a lot of time there, researching, studying. He's a collector of knowledge, not just antiques.'

Then another. 'Alyson's room. She likes to be near the top, to see the sky.'

'And yours?' I asked, my heart thumping a little faster.

He smiled, a slow, tender curve of his lips. 'You'll see.'

We reached the end of the long hall, and Nevaeh pushed open a door, revealing a room bathed in a soft, diffused light. It was larger than I expected, with a wide window overlooking the dense forest, the ancient cedars standing like silent guardians. The walls were a deep, calming blue, and a

massive, four-poster bed, draped in rich, dark fabrics, dominated the center. Bookshelves lined one wall, overflowing with volumes, and a comfortable-looking armchair sat by the window. It was a room that felt both ancient and deeply personal, a sanctuary.

'This is my room,' he said, his voice a quiet invitation.

I walked in, my eyes sweeping the details, trying to absorb every nuance. The air was cool, carrying a faint, clean scent – his scent, intensified. 'It's beautiful,' I breathed, genuinely awed.

He walked to the window, gazing out at the verdant canopy. 'I spend a lot of time here.

Thinking. Reading. Sometimes, just watching the world.'

I moved to the bookshelves, my fingers tracing the spines of the books. Classics, philosophy, history, music theory. 'You really read all of these?'

He chuckled. 'Most of them. Some are Alistair's, from centuries ago. He keeps adding to the collection.' He turned from the window, his gaze settling on me. 'You didn't ask about my human life.'

My heart gave a nervous flutter. 'I... I didn't want to pry.'

'There's nothing to pry about,' he said, his voice devoid of emotion. 'It was unremarkable. I was a musician, a pianist. My family was

wealthy, but distant. I was seventeen, dying of the Spanish influenza, alone in a hospital in Chicago. Alistair found me there. He chose me because I was alone, because no one would miss me.'

The starkness of his words, the casual acceptance of his own disposability, sent a chill through me. 'But you said you remembered how it felt when he saved you. That it wasn't something you could forget.'

A shadow crossed his face, a flicker of ancient pain. 'The fire. The burning. It's the only thing I truly remember from that time. It consumed everything else. My human memories... they were burned away, replaced by the agony of transformation. It was a brutal

rebirth, a cleansing fire that left me... new. But empty of a past.'

He walked towards me, his movements fluid, silent. He stopped inches away, his cold hand reaching out to gently cup my face.

'That's why you are so precious to me, Naddalin. You are a living memory. You feel. You change. You grow. You are everything I lost, and everything I never had.'

His words, raw and vulnerable, stole my breath. I leaned into his touch, my eyes welling with tears. 'Nevaeh,' I whispered, his name a soft prayer.

'I watch you sleep,' he confessed, his voice a low murmur, his thumb brushing away a tear that escaped. 'I listen to your dreams. They

are so vivid, so full of life. It's like watching a movie, a beautiful, vibrant story unfolding before me. And sometimes... sometimes you talk.'

My cheeks flushed crimson, the heat spreading down my neck. 'You eavesdrop on my sleep-talking?' I gasped, mortified.

He chuckled, a rich, melodic sound that vibrated through me. 'It's fascinating. You talk about your mother, about Gabriel, about your worries. And sometimes... sometimes you say my name. Clearly. It's... a potent sound, Naddalin, when it comes from you.'

I buried my face in his chest, too embarrassed to meet his gaze. His arms

wrapped around me, cold and strong, holding me close. 'I'm sorry,' I mumbled into his shirt.

'Don't be,' he whispered, his lips brushing my hair. 'It's a small comfort in a world where I can't read your thoughts. You are the only one whose mind is truly silent to me. It's maddening, and yet... it's also a gift. A challenge.'

We stood there for a long moment, embraced in the quiet sanctuary of his room, the unspoken words hanging in the air between us. He was a creature of ancient power and profound loneliness, and I, a fragile human, was somehow the key to his reawakening.

'So, what else do you want to know?' he asked finally, pulling back slightly, his eyes sparkling with a renewed curiosity.

'Everything,' I replied, a small, tentative smile touching my lips. 'Tell me about Esme, and Kael, and Seraphina. Tell me how you all came to be a family.'

He led me to the armchair by the window, settling me gently onto its plush cushions before perching on the armrest beside me, his proximity a constant, comforting presence.

'Esme,' he began, his voice softening with affection, 'was Alistair's second. He found her in 1921. She had fallen from a cliff, a desperate act after losing her child. Her heart was still beating, a faint, stubborn flutter.'

Alistair, with his boundless compassion, couldn't let her die. He saved her, transformed her. She brought her capacity for passionate love into our family, a boundless well of affection that truly binds us together. She is the heart of our coven.'

'And Kael and Seraphina?'

'They are... a different story. Alistair brought Seraphina next, hoping she would be to me what Esme was to him - a companion, a partner. But our natures were too different. She was beautiful, yes, but fiercely independent, and our bond was more like that of siblings. Two years later, she found Kael. He was attacked by a bear, left for dead in the wilderness. Seraphina, driven by a sudden, inexplicable urge, carried him over a hundred

miles back to Alistair. She saw something in his face, a raw strength, a defiant spirit, that made her strong enough to save him. They've been together ever since, a tempestuous, passionate pair. Kael brought his immense strength, and Seraphina... her tenacity, her unwavering will.'

'And Alice and Lysander?' I asked, remembering their unique gifts.

'Alice and Lysander are rare,' Nevaeh said, a hint of awe in his voice. 'They developed a conscience without guidance, without Alistair's direct intervention. Alice awoke alone, with no memory of her human life, or who created her. It's a mystery. But she had her gift - her precognition. She saw Jasper, and then she saw Alistair and the rest of us,

and she knew she would join us. If she hadn't had her gift, if she hadn't seen that future, she would have turned savage, lost to the thirst. Lysander belonged to a different, harsh family, a coven of nomads in the South. He was a natural leader, charismatic, but tormented by the violence of their existence. Alice found him, saw his potential for change, and brought him to us. He brought his ability to manipulate emotions – calming angry rooms, exciting lethargic crowds. It's a subtle, powerful gift, and he uses it with remarkable control.'

'So, all of you have these... gifts?' I asked, trying to wrap my mind around the concept.

'Alistair has his compassion, an almost supernatural empathy that allows him to connect with others, even humans, in a way

few of us can. Esme, her boundless love. Kael, his physical strength, almost unparalleled among our kind. Seraphina, her fierce tenacity, her unwavering will. Alyson, her visions of future possibilities, though they are subjective, constantly shifting with every new decision. And Lysander, his ability to influence emotions. My gift, as you know, is to hear thoughts.'

'And you said Alice is most sensitive to non-humans, seeing when others of your kind are near?' I recalled his earlier explanation.

'Yes,' he confirmed, his expression growing serious. 'It's why she was so agitated earlier. She sensed the approaching visitors.'

'Are there many of your kind?' I asked, a shiver running down my spine. The thought of more of them, with their impossible speed and strength, was unsettling.

'No, not many. Most are nomads, drifting from place to place, never settling. Only those like us, who have given up hunting humans, can live among you for long. We found one other family in Alaska, but we became too noticeable, too many of us in one place. Most prefer the North, the perpetual twilight.'

'Why?'

He smiled, a faint, knowing curve of his lips. 'Did you have your eyes open this afternoon? We chose the Olympic Peninsula for a reason – it's sunless. You wouldn't believe

how tired you get of nighttime in eighty years. The constant hiding, the fear of exposure... it wears on you. Here, we can walk freely, hunt without fear of discovery.'

'So that's where the legends came from?' I mused, the pieces of their ancient puzzle slowly falling into place. 'Vampires, living in the shadows, avoiding the sun...'

'Probably,' he agreed. 'Humans have a way of twisting the truth, of turning reality into myth. But the core of it is often there.'

He stood up, stretching languidly, his movements as graceful as a dancer's. 'Are you hungry?'

My stomach growled in response, a loud, ungraceful sound that made him chuckle. 'I'm

sorry,' I mumbled, my cheeks flushing. 'I'm keeping you from dinner.'

'I'm fine,' he assured me, a hint of amusement in his voice. 'I've never spent much time around anyone who eats food. I forget.'

'I want to stay with you,' I said in the quiet of his room, the words a raw confession, betraying the depth of my growing addiction to his presence.

He walked to the door, opening it slightly. 'Can't I come in?' he asked, his voice a low, seductive murmur.

'Would you like to?' I couldn't picture him in my small, cluttered kitchen, a creature of

such ethereal beauty in such a mundane setting.

'Yes, if it's all right.' The door closed quietly, and then, with a soft click, he was outside my bedroom door, opening it.

'Very human,' I complimented, a small smile playing on my lips.

'It's definitely resurfacing,' he agreed, a hint of satisfaction in his tone.

He walked beside me, silently, as we descended the stairs. In the dim light of the hallway, he looked more normal, less sparkling, his otherworldly beauty softened by the shadows. He opened the front door, revealing the familiar porch light.

'The door was unlocked?' I asked, a flicker of concern.

'No, I used the key from under the eave.'

I flicked on the porch light, casting a wider glow. 'You spied on me?' I asked, a mixture of indignation and flattered amusement in my voice.

He was unrepentant, a playful smirk curving his lips. 'What else is there to do at night, Naddalin? Besides, you're interesting when you sleep. You talk.'

My face instantly heated, a wave of mortification washing over me. 'No!' I gasped, gripping the counter, feeling the familiar blush creep up my neck.

His expression shifted to chagrin, a rare vulnerability in his perfect features. 'Are you very angry with me?'

'That depends!' I sounded breathless, my voice tight with a mix of embarrassment and genuine curiosity.

'On?' he urged, his golden eyes wide, earnest.

'What you heard!' I wailed, the words escaping in a desperate rush.

He was instantly at my side, his cold hands taking mine, his touch a grounding presence. 'Don't be upset!' He pleaded, holding my gaze, his voice a low, soothing murmur. 'You miss your mother. You worry about her. When it rains, you're restless. You used to talk about

home, but less now. Once you said, 'It's too green.'" He chuckled, a soft, melodic sound.

'Anything else?' I demanded, my voice still tight.

'You did say my name,' he admitted, a hint of amusement returning to his eyes.

'A lot?'

'How much do you mean by 'a lot'? ' he teased, a playful glint in his gaze.

'Oh no!' I hung my head, burying my face in his chest, the mortification overwhelming.

He pulled me against his chest, his arms wrapping around me. 'Don't be self-conscious. If I could dream, it would be about you. And I'm not ashamed.'

We heard tires on the driveway, a sudden, jarring sound that broke the intimate bubble we had created. I stiffened, my heart leaping into my throat. 'Should your father know I'm here?'

'I'm not sure...' Nevaeh began, his eyes darting towards the sound.

'Another time then...' He was gone, a silent blur, melting into the shadows before Gabriel's car even pulled fully into the driveway.

'Nevaeh!' I hissed, a mixture of frustration and lingering desire. I heard a ghostly chuckle, a faint echo of his amusement.

My father's key turned in the lock. 'Naddalin?' he called, his voice tired.

'In here.' I hoped he couldn't hear the hysteria, the frantic pounding of my heart. I grabbed my dinner, the cold lasagna a stark contrast to the warmth that had just enveloped me, and sat at the kitchen table, trying to appear nonchalant. His footsteps were noisy, heavy, a familiar comfort.

'Can you get me some of that? I'm bushed.'

He took off his boots by the door, a mundane ritual.

I scarfed down my food, got his, and gulped milk, my hand trembling slightly. Gabriel sat down, his tired form a comical contrast to the ethereal being who had just vanished.

'Thanks,' he said, already digging into the lasagna.

'How was your day?' I rushed, trying to sound normal.

'Good. Fish were biting... you?'

'Not really - too nice out to stay indoors.'

'It was a nice day,' he agreed, oblivious to the turmoil within me.

I finished my milk, my plate clean. 'In a hurry?' Gabriel asked, noticing my speed.

'Yeah, I'm tired. Going to bed early.'

'You look kinda keyed up.' His eyes narrowed slightly, a hint of suspicion.

'Do I?' I scrubbed dishes with unnecessary vigor, trying to appear busy.

'It's Saturday,' he mused. 'No plans tonight?'

'No, Dad, just sleep.'

'None of the boys in town your type, eh?'
He was still suspicious, his gaze lingering on me.

'No, none of the boys have caught my eye yet.'

'Well, you're too good for them all. Wait till college.'

'Sounds like a good idea,' I agreed,
heading upstairs, my heart hammering.

"Night, honey," he called from the kitchen.

"See you in the morning, Dad."

I walked slowly, deliberately, until I was out of his sight, then sprinted to my window. I leaned out, peering into the darkness.

"Nevaeh?" I whispered, my voice barely audible.

"Yes?" His quiet, laughing response came from behind me, a sudden, startling presence.

I whirled, my heart leaping into my throat. He lay smiling on my bed, a silent, beautiful predator. "Oh!" I breathed, sinking onto the edge of the mattress, my legs suddenly weak.

'I'm sorry.' He tried to hide his amusement, a faint twitch at the corner of his lips.

'Just give me a minute to restart my heart.'

He sat up, then, with a fluid movement, picked me up, setting me gently onto the bed beside him. 'Why don't you sit with me. How's the heart?'

'You tell me - you hear it better.'

His quiet laughter shook the bed, a soft, melodic sound. We listened to my heartbeat slow, gradually returning to a normal pace. 'Can I have a minute to be human?' I asked, needing a moment to compose myself.

'Certainly.' He gestured, a graceful sweep of his hand.

'Stay,' I said, trying to look severe, though a smile threatened to break through.

'Yes, ma'am.' He became a statue, perfectly still, his eyes fixed on me.

I grabbed pajamas and toiletries from my dresser. I slipped out of the room, closing the door quietly behind me. I heard the faint murmur of the TV from downstairs. I banged the bathroom door shut with unnecessary force, a small act of rebellion. I rushed through my shower, the hot water a soothing balm against my tense muscles. I pulled on my t-shirt and sweatpants, then dashed

downstairs, hoping Gabriel would see my wet hair and believe my story.

"Night, Dad."

"Night, Naddalin." He looked startled, his eyes wide.

I flew into my room, closing the door softly. Nevaeh hadn't moved. I smiled, and he twitched, a subtle shift in his perfect stillness. His eyes appraised my damp hair, my tattered shirt. 'Nice.'

I grimaced. 'No, it looks good on you.'

'Thanks,' I whispered, a genuine warmth spreading through me. I sat beside him on the bed. 'What was all that for?'

'Gabriel thinks I'm sneaking out.'

'Oh. Why?'

'Apparently, I look a little overexcited.' He chuckled, a low, throaty sound.

He lifted my chin with a cold finger, his gaze intense. 'You look very warm, actually.' He bent his face to mine, laying his cool cheek against my skin. 'Mmmmmm...'

'It seems to be... much easier for you, now, to be close to me.' I noted, the words a soft exhalation against his skin.

'Does it seem that way to you?' he murmured, his nose gliding to my jaw, inhaling softly. His hand brushed my hair back from my face, his lips touching the hollow beneath my ear.

'Much, much easier,' I exhaled, a shiver running through me.

'Hmm.'

'So I was wondering...' I began, but his fingers traced my collarbone, a light, distracting touch.

'Yes?' he breathed, his cool breath tickling my skin.

'Why is that,' my voice shook, 'do you think?'

He laughed, a low, dark sound. 'Mind over matter.'

I pulled back abruptly; he froze, his body rigid, his eyes wide. We stared at each other, a silent impasse. Then his jaw relaxed, a faint

smile touching his lips. 'Did I do something wrong?'

'No - the opposite. You're driving me crazy,' I explained, the words a breathless rush.

He sounded pleased, a triumphant smile lighting his face. 'Really?'

'Would you like a round of applause?' I asked sarcastically, my cheeks still burning.

He grinned. 'I'm just pleasantly surprised. In the last hundred years, I never imagined this. I didn't believe I'd find someone I wanted to be with... in another way than my siblings. And to find I'm good at it... at being with you...'

'You're good at everything,' I pointed out, a slight edge of exasperation in my voice.

He shrugged, a subtle movement of his marble shoulders, and we both laughed, the sound filling the quiet room.

'But how can it be so easy now? This afternoon...'

'It's not easy,' he sighed, his smile fading, replaced by a more serious expression. 'But this afternoon, I was still... undecided. I'm sorry for my behavior.'

'Not unforgivable,' I disagreed, my voice soft.

'Thank you.' He smiled, a genuine warmth in his eyes. 'I wasn't sure if I was strong

enough... and while that possibility existed, I was... susceptible. Until I decided I was strong enough, that there was no possibility I ever could...' He struggled for words, searching for the right articulation of his internal battle.

'So there's no possibility now?' I asked, my voice barely a whisper.

'Mind over matter,' he repeated, smiling, a subtle challenge in his gaze.

'Wow, that was easy,' I said, a wry amusement in my tone.

He laughed, a rich, vibrant sound. 'Easy for you!' He touched my nose, a light, playful tap.

His face turned serious, the golden eyes darkening. 'I'm trying. If it gets to be... too much, I'm fairly sure I'll be able to leave.'

I scowled, a fierce protectiveness rising within me. 'And it will be harder tomorrow. I've had your scent all day, and I've grown desensitized. If I'm away for long, I'll have to start over. Not quite from scratch, though.'

'Don't go away, then,' I longed, the words a desperate plea.

'That suits me,' he smiled, his eyes twinkling. 'Bring on the shackles - I'm your prisoner.' He formed manacles around my wrists with his cold fingers, then laughed, a joyous, unrestrained sound. He had laughed

more tonight than I had ever heard him laugh before.

'You seem more... optimistic,' I observed, studying his face. 'I haven't seen you like this.'

'Isn't it supposed to be like this? The glory of first love. It's incredible, the difference between reading about something and experiencing it.'

'Very different,' I agreed, a soft smile touching my lips. 'More forceful.'

'For example, jealousy. I've read about it, seen it portrayed. But it shocked me.' He grimaced, a flicker of discomfort. 'Remember when Mike asked you to the dance?'

I nodded. 'The day you started talking to me again.'

'I was surprised by the resentment, almost fury. I didn't recognize it. I was aggravated I couldn't know your thoughts, why you refused him. I knew I had no right to care. Then the line started forming,' he chuckled. 'I waited, anxious. I couldn't deny the relief watching your annoyance. But I couldn't be sure. That was the first night I came here. I wrestled all night, watching you sleep, with the chasm between right and what I wanted. I knew if I ignored you, or left, you'd say yes to Mike. It made me angry. Then, you said my name. Clearly. The feeling that coursed through me was unnerving. I couldn't ignore you longer.'

He was silent for a moment, listening to my

heart, its steady rhythm a testament to his presence. 'But jealousy... it's strange. More powerful and irrational than I thought! Just now, when Gabriel asked about that vile Mike Newton...' He shook his head angrily, a deep, guttural growl rumbling in his chest.

'I should have known you'd be listening,' I groaned, burying my face in his shoulder.

'Of course.'

'That made you feel jealous, really?'

'I'm new at this; you're resurrecting the human in me, and everything feels stronger because it's fresh.'

'But honestly,' I teased, pulling back to look at him, 'for that to bother you, after I

have to hear that Seraphina - the incarnation of pure beauty - was meant for you. How can I compete?'

'There's no competition.' His teeth gleamed, a flash of white perfection. He drew my hands around his back, holding me to his chest, the cold marble of his body a comforting weight against mine. 'I know there's no competition,' I mumbled, my voice muffled against his shirt. 'That's the problem.'

'Of course Seraphina is beautiful, but even if she wasn't like a sister, she could never have one hundredth of the attraction you hold for me. For almost ninety years I've walked among my kind, and yours... thinking I was complete, not realizing what I was seeking.

And not finding anything, because you weren't alive yet.'

'It hardly seems fair,' I whispered, a strange sense of injustice. 'I haven't had to wait at all. Why should I get off so easily?'

'You're right,' he agreed with amusement, his lips brushing my hair. 'I should make this harder for you. You only have to risk your life every second, turn your back on nature, on humanity... what's that worth?'

'Very little - I don't feel deprived of anything.'

'Not yet.' His voice was abruptly full of ancient grief, a sudden, chilling shift in his demeanor.

I tried to pull back, but his hand locked my wrists, his grip unyielding. 'What -' I started, when his body suddenly became alert, rigid with an unseen tension. He released me and disappeared, a silent blur, leaving me nearly falling from the bed.

'Lie down!' he hissed from the darkness, his voice sharp with urgency.

I rolled under my quilt, my heart pounding, trying to appear asleep. I heard the door crack open as Gabriel peeked in. I breathed evenly, feigning slumber. A long minute passed, an eternity of held breath. Then Nevaeh's cool arm was around me, under the covers, his lips at my ear.

'You are a terrible actress - that career path is out.'

'Darn it,' I muttered, my heart still crashing against my ribs.

He hummed a lullaby, a low, melodic sound. 'Should I sing you to sleep?'

'Right,' I laughed, a weak, breathless sound. 'Like I could sleep with you here!'

'You do it all the time,' he reminded me, a hint of amusement in his voice.

'But I didn't know you were here,' I replied icily, a shiver running through me.

'So if you don't want to sleep...' he suggested, ignoring my tone, his voice a low,

seductive murmur. My breath caught in my throat.

'If I don't want to sleep...?'

He chuckled, a dark, throaty sound. 'What do you want to do then?'

'I'm not sure,' I finally said, my mind a blank.

'Tell me when you decide.'

I felt his cool breath on my neck, his nose sliding along my jaw, inhaling softly. 'I thought you were desensitized.'

'Just because I'm resisting the wine doesn't mean I can't appreciate the bouquet,' he whispered, his voice a silken caress. 'You

have a very floral smell, like lavender... or freesia. It's mouthwatering.'

'Yeah, it's an off day when I don't get somebody telling me how edible I smell.' I grimaced, a faint, self-deprecating smile.

He chuckled, then sighed, a sound that held a hint of ancient weariness.

'I've decided what I want to do,' I told him, my voice firm. 'I want to hear more about you.'

'Ask me anything.'

'Why do you do it?' I said, my voice low, earnest. 'I still don't understand how you can work so hard to resist what you... are. I'm glad you do, but why bother?'

He hesitated, a long moment of silence.

'That's a good question. The others wonder how we live. But just because we've been dealt a certain hand, we can choose to rise above - to conquer the boundaries of a destiny none of us wanted. To try to retain whatever essential humanity we can.'

I lay unmoving, awed by his words, by the depth of his philosophy. 'Did you fall asleep?' he whispered, his breath cool against my ear.

'No.'

'Is that all you were curious about?'

I rolled my eyes, a playful defiance. 'Not quite.'

'What else do you want to know?'

'Why can you read minds – why only you?
And Alice, seeing the future... why does that
happen?'

He shrugged, a subtle movement under the quilt. 'We don't really know. Alistair has a theory... he believes we all bring our strongest human traits into the next life, where they're intensified. Like our minds and senses. He thinks I was sensitive to thoughts, and Alice had precognition.'

'What did he bring, and the others?'

'Alistair brought his compassion. Esme brought her ability to love passionately. Kael brought his strength, Seraphina her... tenacity. Lysander was charismatic; now he

manipulates emotions – calming angry rooms, exciting lethargic crowds. It's a subtle gift.'

I considered the impossibilities, the fantastical reality of their existence. He waited patiently, his presence a quiet, comforting anchor.

'So where did it all start? Alistair changed you, someone changed him...'

'Well, where did you come from? Evolution? Creation? Couldn't we have evolved like other species, predator and prey? Or, if you don't believe this world just happened, is it so hard to believe the same force that created the angelfish and shark, the baby seal and killer whale, could create both our kinds together?'

'Let me get this straight - I'm the baby seal, right?'

'Right.' He laughed, a soft, melodic sound, and something touched my hair - his lips?

I wanted to turn, to confirm, but I had to be good. 'Are you ready to sleep? Or more questions?'

'Only a million or two.'

'We have tomorrow, and the next day, and the next...' he reminded me, his voice a soft promise of eternity. I smiled, euphoric, the pain and fear of the day fading into the background.

'Are you sure you won't vanish in the morning? You are mythical.'

'I won't leave you.' His voice held a promise, absolute and unwavering.

'One more, then, tonight...' I blushed, the heat spreading across my cheeks.

'What is it?'

'No, forget it. I changed my mind.'

He groaned, a low, frustrated sound. 'I keep thinking it will get less frustrating, not hearing your thoughts. But it just gets worse.'

'I'm glad you can't read my thoughts. It's bad enough you eavesdrop on my sleep-talking.'

'Please?' His voice was so persuasive, so impossible to resist, a silken plea. I shook my head, a silent defiance.

He sighed, a long, drawn-out sound. 'Very well, Naddalin. Another time, perhaps.'

I nestled deeper into his cold embrace, the rhythmic beat of his non-existent heart a strange, comforting lullaby. The darkness outside the window was absolute, but in his arms, I felt a profound sense of peace.

Nevaeh is a girl helped me into his car, being very careful of the wisps of silk and chiffon, the delicate flowers he'd just pinned into my elaborately styled curls, and my bulky walking cast. He pointedly ignored the angry set of my mouth.

When he had me settled, he got in the driver's seat and headed back out the long, narrow drive.

'At what point exactly are you going to tell them?' I finally bit out, the words tasting like ash in my mouth. My eyes, still stinging from the last round of tears I'd shed getting ready, met Nevaeh's in the rearview mirror.

He sighed, a long, drawn-out sound that did nothing to soothe my frayed nerves. 'We've been over this, Rory. Tonight isn't the night. It's Grammie's seventy-fifth birthday. We can't overshadow that with... with our news.'

'Our news?' I scoffed, twisting in the passenger seat as much as my cast would allow. 'You mean *my* news, Nevaeh. And you're the one who promised we'd tell them *together*.' The delicate silk of my dress rustled with my agitated movements. It was a beautiful dress, one Nevaeh had picked out,

trying to placate me, no doubt. But no amount of chiffon could hide the very obvious curve of my belly, still small enough to be dismissed as too many celebratory pastries by a casual observer, but glaringly evident to me.

He finally pulled the car onto the main road, the familiar route to his grandmother's house unwinding before us. 'And we will, Rory, I swear. Just... not tonight. Please. For Grammie.' His voice was soft, persuasive, a tone I knew all too well. It was the same tone he used when he wanted me to agree to something I was inherently against, the one that usually worked. But not today.

'So, I'm just supposed to waltz in there, smile, eat cake, and pretend everything is perfectly normal while I'm secretly carrying

your child?' My voice cracked on the last word, and I turned to stare out the window, watching the familiar landscape blur past. The anger, momentarily eclipsing the fear, now mingled with a deep sense of betrayal.

He reached across the console, his fingers brushing my arm, but I flinched away. 'Rory, it's not like that. I just want the timing to be right. We want them to be happy for us, don't we?'

'They'll be happy, Nevaeh,' I said, my voice barely a whisper, 'once they get over the shock that their eighteen-year-old granddaughter is pregnant and her boyfriend is too much of a coward to face his own family.'

The car fell silent, the only sound the hum of the engine and the distant chirping of crickets. Nevaeh's jaw was tight, his knuckles white on the steering wheel. He knew I'd hit a nerve. He also knew I was right. We were heading into a perfectly curated family celebration, a tableau of happiness and tradition, and we were about to shatter it, one way or another. The question wasn't *if* we'd tell them, but *when*, and more importantly, *how*. And as the headlights illuminated the decorated porch of his grandmother's house, I knew, with a sinking certainty, that the 'when' was looming, whether Nevaeh was ready or not.

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As the headlights illuminated the decorated porch of her grandmother's house, a sudden resolve hardened in me. I wasn't going to hide anymore. Not for her, not for Grammie Hope, not for anyone. This was my life, our baby, and it deserved to be acknowledged.

Nevaeh parked the car, and the festive sounds of laughter and music drifted out to us.

She turned off the engine, plunging us into a tense silence. 'Ready?' she asked, her voice small, almost pleading.

I looked at her, then at the bright, welcoming glow of the house. Taking a deep breath, I unbuckled my seatbelt. 'As I'll ever be,' I said, pushing open the car door. 'And by 'them,' Nevaeh,' I added, stepping out carefully, my cast thudding softly on the gravel, 'I meant *everyone*.'

I didn't wait for her reply. I hobbled towards the front door, my hand already reaching for the doorknob, ready to face whatever came next. The wisps of silk and chiffon fluttered around me, a defiant banner against the secret I was about to reveal.

The party was in full swing when we entered. The air hummed with chatter, the clinking of glasses, and the scent of Grammie's famous lemon cake. Grammie herself, a tiny woman with a formidable spirit and eyes that missed nothing, was holding court by the fireplace. She spotted us immediately, her face lighting up.

'Nevaeh! Rory, darling! Come here, let me see you!' she exclaimed, her voice surprisingly strong.

Nevaeh offered a strained smile, but I walked straight to Grammie, my heart pounding. The moment felt right, or perhaps, simply inevitable. 'Grammie,' I began, my voice trembling slightly, 'there's something

important Nevaeh and I need to tell you.

Everyone, actually.'

A hush fell over the room as my words cut through the festive din. All eyes turned to me, then to Nevaeh, who had frozen beside me, looking like a deer caught in headlights. My gaze hardened, silently daring her to contradict me.

'I'm pregnant,' I announced, my voice gaining strength with each word, 'and Nevaeh is the other parent.'

The silence that followed was deafening, punctuated only by the distant wail of a siren. Faces around the room shifted from confusion to shock, then to a myriad of other emotions. Nevaeh's parents, standing nearby, looked

utterly aghast. But Grammie... Grammie's eyes, usually so sharp, softened. A flicker of something unreadable crossed her face – surprise, yes, but also a deep, knowing sadness, as if she'd been expecting something like this, just not quite this.

She didn't shout. She didn't cry. Instead, she simply reached out, her small, wrinkled hand gently touching my cheek. 'Oh, my dear girl,' she murmured, her voice barely audible. 'Come, sit down. You look pale.'

The rest of the evening was a blur of hushed conversations, awkward glances, and Nevaeh's increasingly evasive behavior. While her parents pulled her aside for a heated discussion in the hallway, Grammie quietly led me to her armchair, bringing me a slice of

cake I couldn't eat and a glass of water. She didn't ask questions, not then. She just sat beside me, her presence a comforting anchor in the swirling chaos.

As the guests eventually trickled out, leaving behind a quiet house filled with the lingering scent of celebration and unspoken tension, Grammie looked at my cast. 'You can't go home like this, can you, darling? Not with that leg. And... well, you need a quiet place.'

I glanced at Nevaeh, who was still huddled with her parents, their voices low and sharp. She hadn't come to my side once since my announcement. 'I... I suppose not,' I admitted, a wave of exhaustion washing over me.

'Then you'll stay here,' Grammie declared, her tone brooking no argument. 'For a few days, at least. Until your leg is better. And until... until things settle.'

A few days turned into a week. Nevaeh visited, but her presence felt strained, her conversations clipped. She talked about 'figuring things out,' but her actions spoke louder: she was pulling away. Meanwhile, Grammie was a quiet force of nature. She helped me manage my cast, made sure I ate, and just *listened*. She never judged, never blamed. She simply offered a steady, unwavering presence. We talked about everything and nothing – the baby, my fears, her own experiences as a young mother. Her

house, once just a place for family gatherings, began to feel like a sanctuary.

After two weeks, my cast was still on, but my resolve had solidified. Nevaeh called less, visited even less. The distance between us grew with each passing day, mirroring the growing life inside me. One afternoon, as Grammie helped me with a fresh batch of laundry, she looked at me with her knowing eyes.

'So,' she said gently, 'are you going to stay, or are you just visiting?'

I looked around the cozy kitchen, the sun streaming through the window, illuminating dust motes dancing in the air. This was home, now. This was where I felt safe, where I felt

seen. 'I think,' I said, a small, genuine smile finally touching my lips, 'I'm going to stay, Grammie. If that's alright.'

She simply patted my hand, her grip surprisingly firm. 'It's more than alright, darling. It's exactly where you belong.' And just like that, the 'few days' became permanent, a quiet, profound shift in my life, all thanks to a seventy-fifth birthday party and a grandmother's unwavering love.

Chapter Twenty Four: The Hunter's Hex

I folded the letter carefully, my fingers trembling, and sealed it in the envelope. Eventually, he would find it, I knew. I only hoped he would understand, and listen to me just this once. And then, with a final,

deliberate act, I carefully sealed away my heart, locking it behind a wall of ice, preparing myself for the inevitable.

The hex. That's what it felt like. A curse, laid upon me not by some ancient sorcerer, but by the cruel hand of fate, or perhaps, by the mere misfortune of my scent. Why me? Why was I the one marked, the one chosen for this terrifying game of hide-and-seek with a creature whose very existence was predicated on the hunt? The question gnawed at me, a relentless whisper in the confines of my mind. I was the hunted, and the hex of that designation was already beginning to transform me, to strip away the familiar layers of my humanity. I was becoming part of the fallen, whether I liked it or not, stalked by

shadows I could not see, drawn irrevocably towards a destiny I never asked for.

I walked back to the living room, the dull, dead mask firmly in place. Alyson was there, exactly as I had left her, her posture poised, her eyes expectant. I felt her gaze on me, a subtle pressure that made every fiber of my being scream to break free, to run, to fight. But what voice did I have to fight this? What power did a fragile human possess against beings of such ancient, terrifying strength? The hex was on me, a brand, and it promised a future I could barely comprehend.

'My mom was worried, she wanted to come home. But it's okay, I convinced her to stay away.' My voice was lifeless, flat, devoid of emotion, a monotone that I hoped would

pass for exhaustion, for the weariness of a daughter trying to soothe an anxious parent. It was a performance, every word carefully chosen, every inflection meticulously controlled.

'We'll make sure she's fine, Naddalin, don't worry.' Alyson's voice was gentle, almost too gentle, laced with that underlying caution, that subtle shift in her tone that told me she sensed something. But what? Did she suspect the truth of my call, the chilling conversation that had just transpired? Or was she merely attributing my strange demeanor to the stress of the situation, the natural fear of a human caught in their supernatural world? I couldn't risk her knowing. Not now.

I turned away, unable to let her see my face, the raw pain that surely lingered there, threatening to shatter my carefully built composure. My eye fell on a blank page of the hotel stationery on the desk. I went to it slowly, my movements deliberate, a desperate plan solidifying in my mind. There was an envelope there, too. That was good.

'Alyson,' I asked slowly, without turning, keeping my voice level, carefully controlled. 'If I write a letter for my mother, would you give it to her? Leave it at the house, I mean.' It was a test, a desperate gamble. Would she agree? Would she suspect?

'Sure, Naddalin.' Her voice was careful, a subtle shift in her tone. She could see me coming apart at the seams, I knew. I had to

keep my emotions under tighter control. The hex, I thought, was not just about being hunted, but about the constant, agonizing performance required to survive it. The need to deceive, even those who were trying to protect me.

I went into the bedroom again, the door closing with a soft click that felt like the final seal on my fate. I knelt next to the little bedside table, my hand shaking as I picked up the pen.

Nevaeh, I wrote, the letters blurring on the page as tears threatened to spill, but I forced them back. I love you. I am so sorry. He has my mom, and I have to try. I know it may not work. I am so very, very sorry.

Don't be angry with Alyson and Lysander.
If I get away from them it will be a miracle.
Tell them thank you for me. Alyson especially,
please.

-And-

Please, please, don't come after him.
That's what he wants.

Nevaeh, I wrote, the letters blurring on
the page as tears threatened to spill, but I
forced them back. I love you. I am so sorry. He
has my mom, and I have to try. I know it may
not work. I am so very, very sorry.

Don't be angry with Alyson and Lysander.
If I get away from them it will be a miracle.
Tell them thank you for me. Alyson especially,
please.

I signed it quickly, then folded the paper and slipped it into the waiting envelope. My hands were still shaking, but a strange resolve was settling over me, cold and sharp as a winter wind. This wasn't a surrender; it was a desperate gambit, a last throw of the dice. If I was to be hunted, then I would at least try to lead the hunter away from those I loved.

I walked back into the living room, the envelope clutched in my hand. Alyson looked up, her expression softening slightly. 'Done?' she asked, her voice still gentle.

'Yes,' I managed, holding out the letter. 'Could you... could you really make sure she gets this? And please, don't open it. It's... private.'

Alyson took the envelope, her fingers brushing mine. For a fleeting moment, I saw a flicker of concern, perhaps even understanding, in her eyes. 'Of course, Naddalin,' she said, tucking it carefully into a pocket of her jacket. 'I'll see that it gets to her, just as you asked.'

A small, almost imperceptible nod was all I could offer. The words felt lodged in my throat, choked by the fear and the grim determination that now fueled me. I had made my choice. The hex was on me, yes, but I would not be a passive victim. I would fight, in my own way, with the only weapons I had: deception and a desperate hope.

'What do we do now?' I asked, my voice barely a whisper, turning to face the window,

looking out at the city lights that seemed to mock my inner turmoil. The night was vast and indifferent, but somewhere out there, a predator waited, and I was its prey. The game was about to begin.

Alyson moved to stand beside me, her gaze following mine out into the darkness. 'Now,' she said, her voice dropping, 'we wait. Lysander is tracking him. He'll know when the hunter makes his move. And when he does, we'll be ready.'

Ready. The word felt hollow, a fragile shield against an unstoppable force. What did 'ready' even mean in the face of something so ancient, so powerful? Ready to run? Ready to hide? Ready to be caught? My mind raced, trying to grasp at any shred of control. I was a

pawn in a game I didn't understand, played by rules I couldn't comprehend, against an opponent I couldn't even see.

A shiver traced its way down my spine, unrelated to the cool air of the room. It was the chill of the hex, seeping deeper into my bones, transforming me from the inside out. I felt a subtle shift in my senses, a heightened awareness of the quiet hum of the building, the distant city sounds, even the faint, metallic scent of the hotel's cleaning supplies. Was this what it meant to become 'part of the fallen'? To have my human limitations slowly erode, replaced by something sharper, more primal? The thought was terrifying, yet morbidly fascinating.

'And if he comes for me here?' I asked, my voice still hushed, almost afraid to break the fragile silence.

Alyson placed a reassuring hand on my arm, her touch surprisingly warm. 'This hotel is warded, Naddalin. He can't just walk in. He'll have to find a way around it, or through it. That will buy us time. Time to plan. Time to move.'

Time. It felt like a luxury I couldn't afford, a ticking clock counting down to an unknown end. I closed my eyes, picturing my mother's face, her worried frown, the way she always tried to protect me. This was for her. This desperate, terrifying charade was for her. I would lead the hunter on a chase, a wild goose hunt, anything to keep him away from Nevaeh.

Even if it meant embracing the very thing that was turning me into the hunted. The hex was a brand, yes, but perhaps, just perhaps, it could also be a weapon.

*The silence stretched between us,
thick with unspoken fears and the
weight of the impending confrontation.
Outside, the city pulsed with a life
oblivious to the ancient struggle about to
unfold within its walls. I took a slow,
deep breath, the air tasting strangely
sharp, almost electric. This wasn't just
about survival anymore; it was about
defiance. The hunter might have chosen
me, but I would choose how I faced him.
The first chapter of the hunt had begun.*

An Occasion...

Nevaeh helped me into his car, being very careful of the wisps of silk and chiffon, the delicate flowers he'd just pinned into my elaborately styled curls, and my bulky walking cast. He pointedly ignored the angry set of my mouth.

When he had me settled, he got in the driver's seat and headed back out the long, narrow drive.

'At what point exactly are you going to tell me what's going on?' I asked grumpily. I really hated surprises. And he knew that.

'I'm shocked that you haven't figured it out yet.' He threw a mocking smile in my direction, and my breath caught in my throat. Would I ever get used to his perfection?

'I did mention that you looked very nice, didn't I?' I verified.

'Yes.' He grinned again. I'd never seen him dress in black before, and, with the contrast against his pale skin, his beauty was absolutely surreal. That much I couldn't deny, even if the fact that he was wearing a tuxedo made me very nervous.

Not quite as nervous as the dress. Or the shoe. Only one shoe, as my other foot was still securely encased in plaster. But the stiletto heel, held on only by satin ribbons, certainly wasn't going to help me as I tried to hobble around.

'I'm not coming over anymore if Alyson is going to treat me like Guinea Pig Barbie when

I do,' I griped. I'd spent the better part of the day in Alyson's staggeringly vast bathroom, a helpless victim as she played hairdresser and cosmetician. Whenever I fidgeted or complained, she reminded me that she didn't have any memories of being human, and asked me not to ruin her vicarious fun. Then she'd dressed me in the most ridiculous dress – deep blue, frilly and off the shoulders, with French tags I couldn't read – a dress more suitable for a runway than Forks. Nothing good could come of our formal attire, of that I was sure. Unless... but I was afraid to put my suspicions into words, even in my own head.

I was distracted then by the sound of a phone ringing. Nevaeh pulled his cell phone

from a pocket inside his jacket, looking briefly at the caller ID before answering.

'Hello, Gabriel,' he said warily.

'Gabriel?' I frowned.

Gabriel had been... difficult since my return to Forks. He had compartmentalized my bad experience into two defined reactions. Toward Alistair he was almost worshipfully grateful. On the other hand, he was stubbornly convinced that Nevaeh was at fault – because, if not for him, I wouldn't have left home in the first place. And Nevaeh was far from disagreeing with him. These days I had rules that hadn't existed before: curfews... visiting hours.

Something Gabriel was saying made Nevaeh's eyes widen in disbelief, and then a grin spread across his face.

'You're kidding!' He laughed, a sound that made my stomach churn with a premonition.

'What is it?' I demanded.

He ignored me. 'Why don't you let me talk to him?' Nevaeh suggested with evident pleasure. He waited for a few seconds, listening intently.

'Hello, Tyler, this is Nevaeh Amsel.' His voice was very friendly, on the surface. I knew it well enough to catch the soft edge of menace, a subtle warning woven into each word. What was Tyler doing at my house? The awful truth began to dawn on me, chilling me

to the bone. I looked again at the inappropriate dress Alyson had forced me into.

'I'm sorry if there's been some kind of miscommunication, but Naddalin is unavailable tonight.' Nevaeh's tone changed, and the threat in his voice was suddenly much more evident as he continued, each word a cold, sharp blade. 'To be perfectly honest, she'll be unavailable every night, as far as anyone besides myself is concerned. No offense. And I'm sorry about your evening.' He didn't sound sorry at all. And then he snapped the phone shut, cutting off whatever bewildered protest Tyler might have offered.

Nevaeh dropped the phone onto the console between us, his dark eyes sparkling with wicked amusement. 'Gabriel invited Tyler

to the house tonight. Apparently, he thinks I'm a bad influence, and Tyler is the picture of responsibility.'

My jaw dropped. 'Tyler? My dad is trying to set me up with Tyler? After everything?'

'It seems so,' he chuckled, pulling onto the main road. The trees of the Olympic Peninsula were a blur of deep green outside the window, the oppressive silence of the forest broken only by the hum of the engine. 'Though I think he's reconsidering his choice of chaperones.'

'This is ridiculous!' I fumed, crossing my arms, wincing as a bruised rib protested. 'You can't just... forbid me from seeing people!'

'Oh, but I can. And I will, if it means keeping you safe.' His voice was low, serious

now, the amusement gone, replaced by an unwavering resolve. 'Besides, you're dressed for a party. A very specific party.'

My eyes narrowed. 'What party? Nevaeh, what are you doing?'

He merely smiled, a slow, breathtaking pull of his lips that made my heart race despite myself. 'A party for us, Naddalin. A public declaration, if you will. Somewhere people will understand.'

My mind raced, trying to piece together the clues: the formal attire, the 'public declaration,' his possessive phone call to Tyler. A cold knot formed in my stomach, quickly replaced by a burgeoning, terrifying hope.

'No,' I whispered, barely audible. 'You wouldn't.'

He turned off the main road, the car gliding silently onto a less-traveled, heavily wooded lane. Moonlight, filtered through the thick canopy of trees, cast shifting patterns on the forest floor. Up ahead, a soft, golden glow pierced the darkness, growing steadily brighter. It was the Amsel house, illuminated from within, every window a beacon. And as we drew closer, I could discern faint strains of music, classical and elegant, drifting through the night.

He pulled the car to a gentle stop in front of the grand, brightly lit entrance. Several other cars, expensive and polished, were already parked neatly along the drive. As

Nevaeh came around to my side, opening the door for me, I could hear hushed voices, the clinking of glasses.

'Are you ready, my love?' he asked, his hand extending to me, his eyes gleaming with an emotion I couldn't quite decipher, a mixture of anticipation and something deeper, more profound.

I stared at the grand house, then at my cast, then at the elegant, flowing dress Alyson had chosen. My mind was reeling, but a strange calm settled over me. This was it. This was the precipice.

'Ready for what?' I asked, my voice a little breathless, feigning ignorance though my

heart was pounding a frantic rhythm against my ribs.

His smile was a silent answer, full of triumph and absolute certainty. He helped me out of the car, guiding my bandaged leg carefully. As I stood beside him, the cold night air brushing against my bare shoulders, the music swelled, and the voices from inside grew clearer. It sounded like a gathering, a celebration. And I, in my ridiculous gown and single stiletto, was the guest of honor.

This wasn't just a party. This was... this was an announcement. To his family. To their world.

I took a deep breath, the scent of pine and damp earth filling my lungs. No going back

now. My life was hurtling forward, irrevocably bound to his. And for the first time in days, despite the lingering aches and the uncertainty of my future, I felt a flicker of something akin to peace. This was where I belonged, in the eye of this beautiful, dangerous storm, by his side.

The Amsel Gathering..

The grand entrance of the Amsel house swallowed us whole, the soft strains of classical music enveloping me as Nevaeh guided me across the threshold. The interior was a breathtaking expanse of white – walls, high-beamed ceiling, wooden floors, and thick carpets all in varying shades of pristine white, broken only by the shimmering expanse of glass that formed the entire south-facing wall.

Beyond the colossal cedars, the lawn stretched bare to the wide, unseen river, a stark, wild beauty contrasting with the cultivated elegance within. A massive, curving staircase dominated the west side of the room, a silent, graceful ascent to unseen chambers.

Waiting to greet us, standing just to the left of the door, on a raised portion of the floor by a spectacular grand piano, were Nevaeh's parents. I'd seen Alistair before, of course, yet I couldn't help but be struck again by his youth, his outrageous perfection. At his side was Elara, I assumed, the only one of the family I'd never seen before. She had the same pale, beautiful features as the rest of them. Something about her heart-shaped face, her billows of soft, caramel-colored hair, reminded

me of the ingénues of the silent-movie era. She was small, slender, yet less angular, more rounded than the others. They were both dressed casually, in light colors that matched the inside of the house. They smiled in welcome, but made no move to approach us, a silent deference, trying not to frighten me, I guessed.

'Alistair, Elara,' Nevaeh's voice, a low, melodic rumble, broke the short silence, 'this is Naddalin.'

'You're very welcome, Naddalin.' Alistair's step was measured, careful, as he approached me. He raised his hand tentatively, and I stepped forward to shake hands with him, a strange formality in this extraordinary setting.

'It's nice to see you again, Alistair,' I said, remembering his previous insistence on familiarity.

'Please, call me Alistair.'

'Alistair.' I grinned at him, my sudden confidence surprising even myself. I could feel Nevaeh's subtle wave of relief at my side.

Elara smiled and stepped forward as well, reaching for my hand. Her cold, stone grasp was just as I expected, a familiar chill against my skin.

'It's very nice to know you,' she said sincerely, her voice soft and melodic.

'Thank you. I'm glad to meet you, too.' And I was. It was like meeting a fairy tale – Snow White, in the flesh.

'Where are Alyson and Lysander?' Nevaeh asked, but no one answered, as they had just appeared at the top of the wide staircase, a silent, graceful descent.

'Hey, Nevaeh!' Alyson called enthusiastically. She ran down the stairs, a streak of black hair and white skin, coming to a sudden and graceful stop in front of me. Alistair and Elara shot warning glances at her, a silent reprimand, but I liked it. It was natural – for her, anyway.

'Hi, Naddalin!' Alyson said, and she bounced forward to kiss my cheek. If Alistair

and Elara had looked cautious before, they now looked staggered, their expressions a mixture of shock and disbelief. There was shock in my eyes, too, but I was also very pleased that she seemed to approve of me so entirely. I was startled to feel Nevaeh stiffen at my side. I glanced at his face, but his expression was unreadable, a mask of controlled emotion.

'You do smell nice, I never noticed before,' she commented, to my extreme embarrassment, a flush creeping up my neck.

No one else seemed to know quite what to say, and then Lysander was there - tall and leonine, his presence radiating a palpable calm. A feeling of ease spread through me, and I was suddenly comfortable despite where

I was, despite the impossible reality of the situation. Nevaeh stared at Lysander, raising one eyebrow, a silent question, and I remembered what Lysander could do, his subtle manipulation of emotions.

'Hello, Naddalin,' Lysander said. He kept his distance, not offering to shake my hand, a deliberate act of restraint. But it was impossible to feel awkward near him.

'Hello, Lysander.' I smiled at him shyly, then at the others. 'It's nice to meet you all – you have a very beautiful home,' I added conventionally, the words feeling strangely inadequate.

'Thank you,' Elara said, her voice warm. 'We're so glad that you came.' She spoke with

feeling, and I realized that she thought I was brave, a fragile human stepping into their world.

I also realized that Seraphina and Kael were nowhere to be seen, and I remembered Nevaeh's too-innocent denial when I'd asked him if the others didn't like me.

Alistair's expression distracted me from this train of thought; he was gazing meaningfully at Nevaeh with an intense, almost somber, expression. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Nevaeh nod once, a silent acknowledgment.

I looked away, trying to be polite, my eyes wandering again around the spacious room. My gaze settled on the beautiful instrument on

the platform by the door, the grand piano. I suddenly remembered my childhood fantasy that, should I ever win a lottery, I would buy a grand piano for my mother. She wasn't really good – she only played for herself on our secondhand upright – but I loved to watch her play. She was happy, absorbed – she seemed like a new, mysterious being to me then, someone outside the 'mom' persona I took for granted. She'd put me through lessons, of course, but like most kids, I whined until she let me quit.

Elara noticed my preoccupation.

'Do you play?' she asked, inclining her head toward the piano.

I shook my head. 'Not at all. But it's so beautiful. Is it yours?'

'No,' she laughed, a soft, melodic sound. 'Nevaeh didn't tell you he was musical?'

'No.' I glared at his suddenly innocent expression with narrowed eyes, a playful accusation. 'I should have known, I guess.'

Elara raised her delicate eyebrows in confusion.

'Nevaeh can do everything, right?' I explained, a hint of exasperation in my voice.

Lysander snickered, a low, dry sound, and Elara gave Nevaeh a reproving look.

'I hope you haven't been showing off - it's rude,' she scolded gently.

'Just a bit,' he laughed freely, a rich, vibrant sound that filled the room. Her face softened at the sound, and they shared a brief look that I didn't understand, though Elara's face seemed almost smug.

'He's been too modest, actually,' I corrected, defending him.

'Well, play for her,' Elara encouraged, her voice decisive.

'You just said showing off was rude,' he objected, a mock protest.

'There are exceptions to every rule,' she replied, her eyes twinkling.

'I'd like to hear you play,' I volunteered, eager now.

'It's settled then.' Elara, with surprising strength, pushed him toward the piano. He pulled me along, sitting me on the bench beside him, his touch cool against my arm.

He gave me a long, exasperated look before he turned to the keys, his fingers hovering.

And then his fingers flowed swiftly across the ivory, a blur of motion, and the room was filled with a composition so complex, so luxuriant, it was impossible to believe only one set of hands played. I felt my chin drop, my mouth open in astonishment, and heard low chuckles behind me at my reaction, the sound of their amusement.

Nevaeh looked at me casually, the music still surging around us without a break, and winked. 'Do you like it?'

'You wrote this?' I gasped, understanding dawning on me.

He nodded. 'It's Elara's favorite.'

I closed my eyes, shaking my head slowly, overwhelmed.

'What's wrong?' he asked, his voice laced with concern, the music softening around us.

'I'm feeling extremely insignificant.'

The music slowed further, transforming into something softer, more intimate, and to my surprise, I detected the haunting melody of his lullaby weaving through the profusion of

notes, a familiar comfort amidst the complexity.

'You inspired this one,' he said softly, his voice a whisper against the backdrop of his own creation. The music grew unbearably sweet, a poignant, aching beauty.

I couldn't speak, choked by emotion.

'They like you, you know,' he said conversationally, his voice a low murmur. 'Elara especially.'

I glanced behind me, but the huge room was empty now. They had vanished as silently as they had appeared.

'Where did they go?'

'Very subtly giving us some privacy, I suppose.'

I sighed, a mix of relief and lingering anxiety. 'They like me. But Seraphina and Kael...' I trailed off, not sure how to express my doubts, the unspoken tension I had felt.

He frowned. 'Don't worry about Seraphina,' he said, his eyes wide and persuasive, a silent command. 'She'll come around.'

I pursed my lips skeptically. 'Kael?'

'Well, he thinks I'm a lunatic, it's true, but he doesn't have a problem with you. He's trying to reason with Seraphina.'

'What is it that upsets her?' I wasn't sure if I truly wanted to know the answer, a part of me fearing the truth.

He sighed deeply, a sound like wind through ancient trees. 'Seraphina struggles the most with... with what we are. It's hard for her to have someone on the outside know the truth. And she's a little jealous.'

'Seraphina is jealous of me?' I asked incredulously, the idea almost comical. I tried to imagine a universe in which someone as breathtaking as Seraphina would have any possible reason to feel jealous of someone like me.

'You're human.' He shrugged, a subtle movement of his marble shoulders. 'She wishes that she were, too.'

'Oh,' I muttered, still stunned by the revelation. 'Even Lysander, though...'

'That's really my fault,' he said, a hint of self-reproach in his voice. 'I told you he was the most recent to try our way of life. I warned him to keep his distance.'

I thought about the reason for that, the bloodlust, and shuddered, a cold tremor running through me.

'Elara and Alistair... ?' I continued quickly, to keep him from noticing my reaction, to change the subject.

'Are happy to see me happy. Actually, Elara wouldn't care if you had a third eye and webbed feet. All this time she's been worried about me, afraid that there was something missing from my essential makeup, that I was too young when Alistair changed me... She's ecstatic. Every time I touch you, she just about chokes with satisfaction.'

'Alyson seems very... enthusiastic.'

'Alyson has her own way of looking at things,' he said through tight lips, a subtle warning in his tone.

'And you're not going to explain that, are you?' I challenged, sensing the unspoken secret.

A moment of wordless communication passed between us. He realized that I knew he was keeping something from me. I realized that he wasn't going to give anything away. Not now.

'So what was Alistair telling you before?' I pressed, recalling the intense exchange I had witnessed.

His eyebrows pulled together. 'You noticed that, did you?'

I shrugged. 'Of course.'

He looked at me thoughtfully for a few seconds before answering. 'He wanted to tell me some news - he didn't know if it was something I would share with you.'

'Will you?'

'I have to, because I'm going to be a little...
overbearingly protective over the next few
days - or weeks - and I wouldn't want you to
think I'm naturally a tyrant.'

'What's wrong?' I asked, a fresh wave of
anxiety.

'Nothing's wrong, exactly. Alyson just sees
some visitors coming soon. They know we're
here, and they're curious.'

'Visitors?' I whispered, my heart sinking.

'Yes... well, they aren't like us, of course -
in their hunting habits, I mean. They probably
won't come into town at all, but I'm certainly

not going to let you out of my sight till they're gone.'

I shivered, a genuine, uncontrollable tremor.

'Finally, a rational response!' he murmured, a hint of amusement returning to his voice. 'I was beginning to think you had no sense of self-preservation at all.'

I let that one pass, looking away, my eyes wandering again around the spacious, impossibly bright room.

He followed my gaze. 'Not what you expected, is it?' he asked, his voice smug.

'No,' I admitted.

'No coffins, no piled skulls in the corners; I don't even think we have cobwebs... what a disappointment this must be for you,' he continued slyly, his lips curving into a playful smirk.

I ignored his teasing. 'It's so light... so open.'

He was more serious when he answered. 'It's the one place we never have to hide.'

The song he was still playing, my song, drifted to an end, the final chords shifting to a more melancholy key. The last note hovered poignantly in the silence, a lingering echo.

'Thank you,' I murmured, my voice thick with emotion. I realized there were tears in my eyes, and I dabbed at them, embarrassed.

He touched the corner of my eye, trapping one I missed. He lifted his finger, examining the single drop of moisture broodingly. Then, so quickly I couldn't be positive that he really did, he put his finger to his mouth to taste it.

I looked at him questioningly, and he gazed back for a long moment before he finally smiled, a slow, tender curve of his lips.

'Do you want to see the rest of the house?'

'No coffins?' I verified, the sarcasm in my voice not entirely masking the slight but genuine anxiety I felt.

He laughed, a clear, unrestrained sound, taking my hand, leading me away from the piano.

'No coffins,' he promised.

We walked up the massive staircase, my hand trailing along the satin-smooth rail. The long hall at the top of the stairs was paneled with a honey-colored wood, the same as the floorboards.

'Seraphina and Kael's room... Alistair's office... Alyson's room...' He gestured as he led me past the doors, his voice a soft murmur.

He would have continued, but I stopped dead at the end of the hall, staring incredulously at the ornament hanging on the wall above my head. Nevaeh chuckled at my bewildered expression.

'You can laugh,' he said. 'It is sort of ironic.'

I didn't laugh. My hand raised automatically, one finger extended as if to touch the large wooden cross, its dark patina contrasting with the lighter tone of the wall. I didn't touch it, though I was curious if the aged wood would feel as silky as it looked.

'It must be very old,' I guessed.

He shrugged. 'Early sixteen-thirties, more or less.'

I looked away from the cross to stare at him, a million questions forming in my mind.

'Why do you keep this here?' I wondered aloud.

'Nostalgia. It belonged to Alistair's father.'

'He collected antiques?' I suggested doubtfully, the idea incongruous with everything I knew of them.

'No. He carved this himself. It hung on the wall above the pulpit in the vicarage where he preached.'

I wasn't sure if my face betrayed my shock, but I returned to gazing at the simple, ancient cross, just in case. I quickly did the mental math; the cross was over three hundred and seventy years old. The silence stretched on as I struggled to wrap my mind around the concept of so many years, so many lifetimes.

'Are you all right?' He sounded worried, his voice pulling me back to the present.

'How old is Alistair?' I asked quietly, ignoring his question, still staring up at the relic.

'He just celebrated his three hundred and sixty-second birthday,' Nevaeh said. I looked back at him, a million more questions in my eyes, the weight of their history pressing down on me.

He watched me carefully as he spoke, his gaze unwavering.

'Alistair was born in London, in the sixteen-forties, he believes. Time wasn't marked as accurately then, for the common people anyway. It was just before Cromwell's rule, though.'

I kept my face composed, aware of his scrutiny as I listened. It was easier if I didn't try to believe, to simply absorb the information as a fantastical tale.

'He was the only son of an Anglican pastor. His mother died giving birth to him. His father was an intolerant man. As the Protestants came into power, he was enthusiastic in his persecution of Roman Catholics and other religions. He also believed very strongly in the reality of evil. He led hunts for witches, werewolves... and vampires.' I grew very still at the word, my breath catching in my throat. I'm sure he noticed, but he went on without pausing.

'They burned a lot of innocent people - of course the real creatures that he sought were not so easy to catch.

'When the pastor grew old, he placed his obedient son in charge of the raids. At first Alistair was a disappointment; he was not quick to accuse, to see demons where they did not exist. But he was persistent, and more clever than his father. He actually discovered a coven of true vampires that lived hidden in the sewers of the city, only coming out by night to hunt. In those days, when monsters were not just myths and legends, that was the way many lived.

'The people gathered their pitchforks and torches, of course' - his brief laugh was darker now, a dry, humorless sound - 'and waited

where Alistair had seen the monsters exit into the street. Eventually one emerged.'

His voice was very quiet; I strained to catch the words, leaning closer.

'He must have been ancient, and weak with hunger. Alistair heard him call out in Latin to the others when he caught the scent of the mob. He ran through the streets, and Alistair - he was twenty-three and very fast - was in the lead of the pursuit. The creature could have easily outrun them, but Alistair thinks he was too hungry, so he turned and attacked. He fell on Alistair first, but the others were close behind, and he turned to defend himself. He killed two men, and made off with a third, leaving Alistair bleeding in the street.'

He paused, a significant silence. I could sense he was editing something, keeping something from me, a crucial detail withheld.

'Alistair knew what his father would do. The bodies would be burned - anything infected by the monster must be destroyed. Alistair acted instinctively to save his own life. He crawled away from the alley while the mob followed the fiend and his victim. He hid in a cellar, buried himself in rotting potatoes for three days. It's a miracle he was able to keep silent, to stay undiscovered.

'It was over then, and he realized what he had become.'

I'm not sure what my face was revealing, but he suddenly broke off, his gaze searching mine.

'How are you feeling?' he asked, his voice laced with concern.

'I'm fine,' I assured him, though my mind was reeling. And, though I bit my lip in hesitation, he must have seen the curiosity burning in my eyes, an insatiable hunger for more.

He smiled, a slow, knowing curve of his lips. 'I expect you have a few more questions for me.'

'A few.'

His smile widened over his brilliant teeth. He started back down the hall, pulling me along by the hand, his touch cool and comforting. 'Come on, then,' he encouraged. 'I'll show you.'

The Hex of the Hunted...

The cool, sterile air of the hospital room was a constant reminder of my fragile mortality, a stark contrast to the ancient, enduring presence beside me. Nevaeh sat by my bed, a silent sentinel, his golden eyes fixed on my face, a blend of concern and something deeper, something I was still learning to decipher. He had just finished recounting the intricate tapestry of his family's past, a history stretching back centuries, filled with tales of transformation, sacrifice, and the relentless

pursuit of a different kind of existence. The cross on the wall, a relic from Alistair's human father, now held a new, profound significance, a symbol of a past life that still echoed in their immortal present.

'It's incredible,' I murmured, my voice still a little weak, the painkillers a dull hum in my veins. 'All those years... all that history. It's hard to imagine.'

Nevaeh's lips curved into a faint, wistful smile. 'It is. Sometimes, even for us, it feels like a dream, a distant memory that belongs to another lifetime.' He paused, his gaze drifting to the window, where the Phoenix sun, a relentless enemy, beat down on the desert landscape. 'But some things... some feelings...

they carry over, no matter how much time passes, no matter how much we change.'

I watched him, sensing a shift in his demeanor, a subtle tension that hadn't been there moments before. 'What kind of feelings?' I prompted, my curiosity overriding my lingering discomfort.

He turned back to me, his eyes now holding a distant, almost haunted quality. 'The ones that define you, I suppose. The core of who you were, intensified. Alistair believes it's our strongest human traits that manifest as our gifts. But sometimes... sometimes it's more than a gift. It's a hex.'

A hex. The word hung in the air, heavy and unsettling. 'What do you mean?'

He sighed, a sound like wind through dry leaves. 'Even as a human, I felt it. A constant awareness, a heightened sensitivity to the world around me, to the emotions of others. It was... overwhelming. Like living with every nerve exposed. And when the pain got too loud, when the world became too much... my mind would slip. I would see things, feel things that weren't real, yet felt terrifyingly so.'

My breath hitched. This sounded eerily familiar to something I'd heard before, a fragmented memory from a time that felt both distant and terrifyingly close.

'It was like being adrift in a dream,' he continued, his voice softer now, almost a whisper, as if recounting a sacred, painful secret. 'Yet the dream felt terrifyingly real; it

was the world of the fallen. As I would come to know it, 'the underworld...' A place where emotions were raw, exposed, amplified. Where hidden currents of despair and anger flowed like dark rivers. I would see fleeting images, hear fragments of thoughts not my own, feel the echoes of ancient sorrows. It was a terrifying place, yet in its strange, distorted way, it offered a perverse kind of understanding, a sense of not being entirely alone in my profound isolation.'

He paused, his eyes searching mine, as if gauging my understanding, my reaction. My mind raced, connecting the dots, a chilling realization dawning on me. This was what Alyson had seen, what Lysander had felt. This

was the source of his unique gift, the very essence of his being.

'It sounds... like a burden,' I said, my voice barely audible.

'It was,' he agreed, a grim shadow passing over his face. 'Even then, I felt like I was being watched, being pursued. A constant, unseen presence, just beyond the edge of my perception. Like I was being hunted, even before I knew what a hunter truly was.'

The words resonated with a terrifying clarity, echoing the very fear that had driven me to the mirrored room. The hex of being hunted. It wasn't just Nevaeh's pursuit; it was a deeper, more intrinsic part of Nevaeh's

existence, a premonition that had shadowed his human life.

'And then Alistair found you,' I whispered, remembering the story of his transformation. 'And you became... one of them. One of the fallen.'

He nodded, his gaze distant again, lost in the echoes of his past. 'Yes. The transformation... it intensified everything. The senses, the emotions, the visions. It was a brutal rebirth, but it also gave me the strength to fight back against the hex, to understand the shadows that had always lurked. To have a voice to fight it, even if it meant becoming part of the fallen, whether I liked it or not. I was stocked by them, by the very nature of what I became.'

His words painted a vivid, unsettling picture: a human boy, already burdened by a psychic sensitivity that made him feel hunted, then forcibly transformed into a creature of the night, forever bound to the very essence of the hunt. His very existence was a paradox, a constant battle against the primal urges of his new nature, fueled by the amplified echoes of his human torment.

'So, the tracker...' I began, the connection between his past and our present suddenly terrifyingly clear.

'Nevaeh,' Nevaeh finished, his voice hardening, the ancient grief in his eyes replaced by a fierce, protective resolve. 'He is the embodiment of that hunt, the external manifestation of the hex I've always felt. He

came for me, for what I am, and you,
Naddalin, became entangled in his game
because you are mine. You are the one
vulnerable element, the one thing he knows
can truly hurt me.'

He reached out, his cold fingers gently
tracing the line of my jaw, his touch a stark
contrast to the warmth that flooded through
me. 'But this time,' he vowed, his voice a low,
dangerous growl, 'the hunted will become the
hunter. And the hex will be broken.'

The room was silent save for the soft
beeping of my monitors, a steady rhythm
against the unspoken promise in his eyes. I
looked at him, this beautiful, ancient creature,
burdened by a past I could barely
comprehend, yet fiercely devoted to my safety.

The weight of his history, the 'hex' he carried, suddenly felt like a shared burden, a part of the impossible bond that tied us together.

And as I lay there, listening to the quiet hum of the hospital, I understood, with a chilling clarity, that the story of Nevaeh, the boy who felt the shadows before he knew their names, was only just beginning to truly unfold. The rain on the Pennsylvania hillside, the whispers in the school halls, the desperate words poured onto paper in the dark of his room – they were all threads in a tapestry that was now inextricably woven with my own.

Part: First Visions of Emotion of Nevaeh

Rain lashes down on the Pennsylvania hillside like needles from the sky. Nevaeh

stands still in the storm, her bare skin soaked, goosebumps rising with each gust of cold wind. The uniform she tore off lies forgotten in the mud behind her. She refuses to wear it any longer-it feels like a prison.

Today was another day in that building. School. A place that should have offered structure, connection, safety. Instead, it was filled with whispers, stares, and the quiet violence of exclusion. Words spoken behind hands. Notes passed with cruel little jokes. The kind of abuse no teacher sees. The kind that burrows deep.

She closes her eyes.

The rain isn't water-it is cleansing, fierce, punishing. It washes down her back like a

baptism, or maybe a sentence. Her hair clings to her face, strands matted across her lips. Thunder cracks overhead. She does not flinch.

'Why am I here?' she whispers. 'Why does it always hurt?'

There is no answer. Just the sound of her breath, the rush of wind, and the ache in her chest that never seems to fade.

Nevaeh presses her palm to her chest. She can feel her heartbeat, fast, fragile. Her fingers tremble. In the distant trees, something shifts-a flicker of movement in the corner of her eye. She tells herself it is the wind.

But she knows better.

She has seen them before. The shadows.
The flickers. The things no one else talks
about.

They always appear when the pain gets
too loud.

She begins to walk, mud squelching
between her toes. The old swing by the tree
near the train tracks still creaks in the wind, a
relic of childhood joy that now seems
impossibly far away. She reaches up, brushing
her fingers along the worn rope, and
remembers laughter. Not hers. Someone
else's.

Inside, her house is dark. Hope, her
guardian, is gone for the evening. Nevaeh
walks up the stairs, dripping water with each

step. Her teddy bear waits on her bed-a relic of safety, of a younger version of herself. She presses it to her chest.

And then, she writes.

Words pour out of her in ink and tears.
Words she can never say aloud. A story about a girl who feels like a ghost in her own life. About fear. About silence. About being seen and still invisible.

She does not know yet that she is not alone.

That something watches her.

Something ancient.

Something waiting.

And this-this moment in the rain, this night
soaked in sorrow-is not the end of her story.

It is the beginning.